

Monk Seals in Libya

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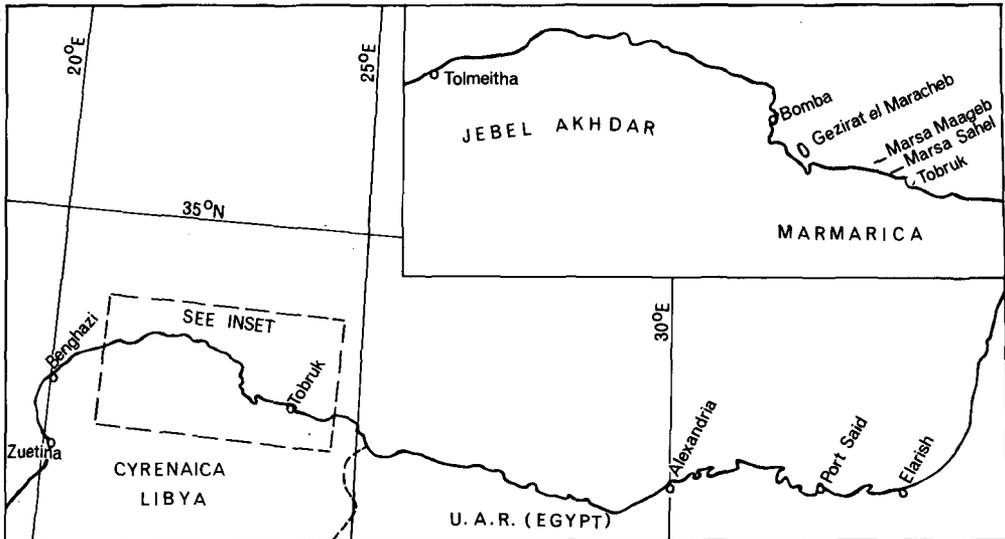
The seriously endangered Mediterranean monk seal has not been recorded off Libya since 1810. Mr Norris lived in Libya in 1966–68, and is able to report regular offshore sightings on the inaccessible Marmarican coast, two occasions in the early 1960s when a 'strange fish' with 'whiskers like a man' and a cry 'like a woman' hauled up on a beach within Tobruk harbour, and one established breeding colony of 20 or more animals living in submarine offshore caves, known to local fishermen and never molested by them.

The world population of the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* probably stands today at a few hundreds. Two fairly large colonies near the Atlantic seaboard of north-west Africa account for much of this total; the remainder are dispersed through the Mediterranean and Black Seas in a number of much smaller colonies of up to 20 individuals each. From historical sources we know that the monk seal was formerly common throughout this region. At the time of Admiral W. H. Smith's travels in the early nineteenth century, for example, it was apparently abundant along the coast between Alexandria and Benghazi. In 1962, summarising the available recent information, van Wijngaarden concluded that its present-day occurrence along this particular littoral was questionable, and Fisher *et al* (1969) quote a 1940 sighting of a single specimen near El Arish (Sinai) as the most recent authentic report for this area.

The situation, however, is not quite as bleak as this: clearly the lack of reports is very much a function of the remoteness of much of this particular coastline, as indeed was recognised by the authors of *The Red Book*. During my 2½ years residence in Cyrenaica, in 1966–68, I tried to establish the true incidence of the monk seal by personal observation and interrogation of the residents, and concluded that it is less rare than has been supposed.

Evidence From Marmarica

My personal observation was mainly confined to the Marmarican coast. This is sufficiently inaccessible to make a definitive survey completely out of the question; only casual inspection was possible and proved entirely fruitless. Conversation with the resident population was rather more rewarding, and brought to light two occasions when the *bumniya* had appeared within Tobruk harbour during recent years. It was not possible to date either of these appearances with any accuracy, but they were most probably within the period 1960–65. The first of these 'strange fishes' came out of the sea to a small beach where it was observed to have 'whiskers like a man' and heard to 'cry like a woman' when poked with a stick. Its eventual fate is not known, but it seems unlikely that it would survive the chastisement to which it was obviously subjected. The second specimen also attracted its crowd of



curious onlookers. Fearing that it might be dangerous, it was destroyed by a home-made bomb. Another animal, beached and reportedly dead near Marsa Maagheb late in 1967, could conceivably have been a seal but its description was not completely convincing.

Offshore sightings were more numerous. Over the period 1966–68 the average was perhaps as high as one per month, but the greatest incidence was during late summer and autumn. The final authentic sighting during this period was of a group of several seals near one of the headlands at Marsa Sahel in August 1968.

The economy of the Marmarican tribesman is traditionally based upon pastoralism. He has no great dependence upon the sea for food, lacks an organised fishing industry, and has only a limited knowledge of marine life, so it is perhaps not surprising that his reaction to anything unusual upon the beach should be curiosity, followed by molestation and the death of the specimen. There appeared to be no other motive for killing seals, and no awareness of the potentialities of seal skin.

In spite of the remoteness of the likely hauling grounds, it is doubtful whether any seals would totally escape a visit by man during the critical nursing period. In fact, there is probably a maximum of human interference at this time. An increase in the numbers of fish shoals entering the inshore waters in September and October attracts a limited amount of fishing, not so much by traditional rod and line or netting techniques, but by bombing. The Libyan Government has made this illegal, but the law is difficult to enforce, and even now, more than 25 years after the North African conflict, the desert yields a ready supply of the necessary raw materials for bomb manufacture. A single bomb will destroy or maim many more fish than the 'fisherman' needs, as well as much additional marine fauna, though it is perhaps unlikely to kill an adult seal outright; it must, however, be a serious deterrent to the successful rearing of young.

Western Cyrenaica

Further west, the narrow coastal strip to the north of Jebel Akhdar supports a more settled population including a number of small intrusive elements from other Mediterranean lands. These people have a greater awareness of the sea than their neighbours in Marmarica, and some are professional fishermen. I am indebted to Hassan Saghir, Lebanese authority on the marine life of the Eastern Mediterranean, for an account of a colony of seals whose existence has been known to the fishermen of Tolmeitha for many years. This colony is permanently resident in offshore submarine caves close to Tolmeitha, and is rarely disturbed, being regarded with a respect that borders upon superstition. The indifference which stems from such a peaceful coexistence makes it difficult to form an assessment of the size of the colony, but the impression given is of a fairly constant population of about 20 to 30 individuals.

Conclusions

In 1968 there was good evidence that a colony of upwards of 20 seals was resident near Tolmeitha and living in apparent harmony with its environment. If the favourable attitude of the Tolmeitha fishermen continues, then the colony must have a good chance of survival without the imposition of strict legal controls. Nothing is known of the dynamics of this colony however, and if it is true that numbers remain more or less constant, then natural increase is being compensated by the transfer of individuals to other parts of the coast, possibly to Marmarica where chances of survival are slender. The higher proportion of sightings along the Marmarican coast near the pupping season may favour such a conclusion, although these reports were mainly from swimmers and yachtsmen, and the high late summer/autumn incidence may merely reflect greater recreational activities at this season. An alternative hauling ground for the Tolmeitha colony could exist on one or more of the islands in the Gulf of Bomba. The largest of these islands is now shown on maps as Gezirat el Maracheb, but was formerly known as Seal Island. It is low-lying with gently shelving sandy beaches and would seem to meet the monk seal's pupping requirements. More important, it is uninhabited and rarely visited by man.

References

- FISHER, J., SIMON, N., and VINCENT, J., 1969. *The Red Book*. London.
 VAN WIJNGAARDEN, A., 1962. The Mediterranean monk seal. *Oryx*, vi, 5.

In a newly published book, *Libyan Mammals* (reviewed on page 370) E. Hufnagl reports monk seals breeding 'on a small sand island not far from the oil port of Zuetina' (Zuwaytinah), on the west coast south of Benghazi. *Editor*.

SAND CAT *opposite*. The sand cat *Felis margarita* ranges from southern USSR to North Africa but is very rare in Arabia, where it only became known to science when Wilfred Thesiger discovered it in 1948. This specimen, photographed last year by Ralph Izzard, is only the seventh known Arabian specimen. It was captured by Sheikh Qasim of Qatar, owner of the Qatar Arabian oryx herd, in the Empty Quarter of Saudi Arabia, but died shortly after in Qatar Zoo.

