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CONVENTION ON THE CONSERVATION OF EUROPEAN WILDLIFE  
AND NATURAL HABITATS

**Standing Committee**

34<sup>th</sup> meeting  
Strasbourg, 2-5 December 2014

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**Possible File**

**THREAT TO THE MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL  
(*MONACHUS MONACHUS*)  
IN TURKEY**

**REPORT BY THE COMPLAINANT**

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## UPDATE REPORT ON MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL BREEDING CAVE IN YEŞİLOVACIK - MERSİN-TURKEY

(Covering the period between May 2013 and March 2014)

by **Dr. Meltem Ok**

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**- March 2014 -**

### Important Note:

Concerning the grave threat to the Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*) in Mersin / Turkey, a complaint was filed in June 2011. The file pertaining to the issue is still in pending state and its status regarded as a ‘possible’ file because the Turkish delegation had previously stated that the issue is being addressed at the National Court level and that no building construction shall be permitted until the court has reached its final decision. In reality, the construction of marine structures has never been stopped and in actual fact has undergone intense progress with most of the phases in the construction already completed. Yet, the local ministerial department for wildlife protection turns a blind eye to the ongoing developments. Finally a monk seal pup born in December 2013 in the breeding cave which was being monitored by the research team of IMS-METU, was found dead on the beach (out of his breeding cave) close to the construction site on 28<sup>th</sup> February. The scientific team of experts at the Institute of Marine Sciences of the Middle East Technical University (IMS-METU) has been extremely concerned about the entire construction development since its onset. It is vitally important to emphasize that, since the huge building construction project is continuing and has recently progressed extremely rapidly then in all probability construction may be finalized before the national court reaches its final decision. Therefore, we once again urge the secretariat to take the necessary actions/steps as soon as possible to stop/suspend the construction at least until the court reaches the final decision.

### Summary of the past

As stated in the previous reports (**Report 1**: Entitled: Threats to the Mediterranean Monk Seal (*Monachus monachus*) in Turkey numbered as T-PVS/Files (2013) 22 – May 2013; **Report 2**: Entitled: About the Monk Seal population likely to be affected by the marine terminal planned for Yeşilovacık, Mersin Turkey; **Report 3**: Complaint form issued in June 2011 by IMS-METU): The Balıklı cave located in Yeşilovacık-Mersin Turkey is one of the last breeding caves of the Mediterranean monk seal along the southern coast of Turkey (North Eastern Mediterranean). In these reports the reasons are clearly explained in detail as to why Balıklı cave is of utmost importance for the survival of the Monk seal colony in the Northeastern Mediterranean. The site has recently been designated as an industrial site and various projects including nuclear and thermic power plants and a huge marine terminal servicing the industry are planned for the site. As such projects would undoubtedly have detrimental consequences on the seals, a scientific team of experts from IMS-METU, has been extremely concerned about the entire venture and therefore the team initiated a monitoring survey in the cave using photo-traps on 4th April 2010 (ca 900 seal photographs have been obtained to date). In the previous report (*No.1*), a number of these photographs were presented in chronological order with the number of individuals using the cave specified. Based on the surveys carried out at the site, the national authorities in charge of monk seal conservation were alerted on the importance of this issue. The inevitable consequences of the construction and chiefly the crucial loss of yet another breeding cave for the seal population in the entire eastern Mediterranean has been presented to the authorities concerned by various means including population viability analysis which projects a hopeless future for the colony. Following the reckless reaction by the authorities, a letter of complaint was submitted to the secretariat. Additionally as a response to the situation, an NGO Underwater Research Society issued a summons against the ministry responsible for the protection of wildlife in Turkey for reaching a critical decision based on a superficial report and disregarding the

environmental significance of the site. Later, the ministry stated that no construction will begin until the National court has reached its final decision.

According to the report submitted by the Turkish government to the Standing Committee in October 2013, Turkish authorities halted construction for only five months despite the previous decision that “there will be no construction until the National court has reached a final decision” but meanwhile commencement of the construction operation was tragically witnessed. It was recently stated in the report of the 33<sup>rd</sup> meeting of the Standing Committee held on 3-6 December 2013, that Turkish authorities will establish a pool of experts to inspect the current situation and that meanwhile building construction be suspended until the possible impact on the morphology of the cave and consequently on the Monk Seal population are assessed.

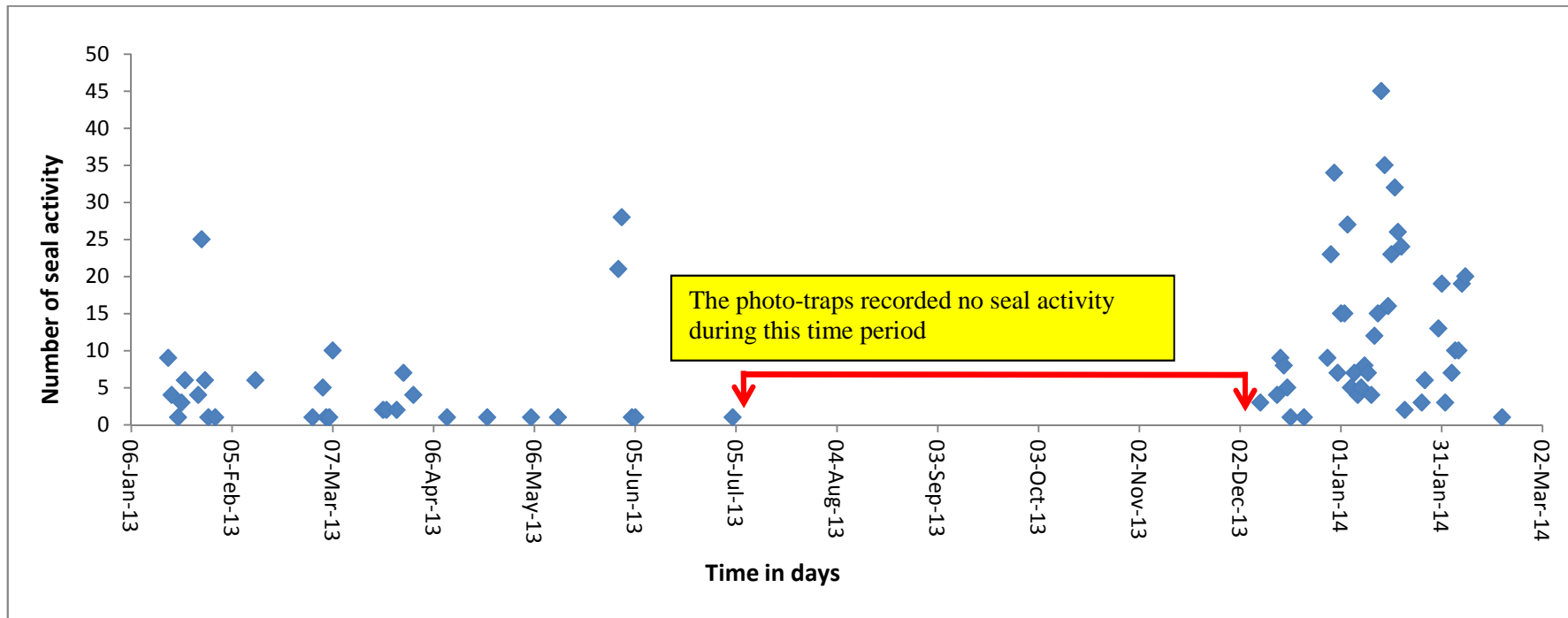
The research team has visited the area on a regular basis and is in contact with the local village inhabitants at the construction site. They witnessed that the construction activities carried on (with some deceptive slowdowns) in the area even during the breeding season of the monk seal. The efforts to push the authorities to take necessary actions and to stop the construction until the court’s decision have so far proven unsuccessful.

### **Current Situation**

Given that all cameras were active and recording the seal movements in the cave since the very beginning there has been a remarkable and worrying decrease in seal activity in the cave during 2013. More strikingly no single event was recorded during the period from the beginning of July 2013 until the beginning of December 2013. Recordings obtained in December 2013 show one female – presumably the mother - and one new born pup photographed in the same cave. Another cause for much concern has been the disappearance of a pup born in December 2012. Typical to the monk seals in the eastern Mediterranean, a young seal tends to remain in and around the natal cave during the first year of life. Moreover the number of seals that previously used the cave before the initiation of construction has vanished. As stated in the earlier reports, there are already very few caves in the region suitable for breeding activity which is considered to be a critical factor limiting the breeding success. The lack of seal activity in the cave for the past 6 months (Fig 1) clearly shows that the seals abandoned the cave and most probably the entire area during the heavy construction period. However, the female carrying the pup was forced to return to the cave as there was no other alternative whelping site in the immediate surroundings. The last record obtained from the cameras was a single photograph showing the new born pup in a very undernourished and weak condition.

Unfortunately, the most disturbing event was the death of the said pup born in the cave around 24 November 2013. The carcass of the animal was found on the beach near the construction site by local inhabitants on 28<sup>th</sup> February 2014. A group from the construction company personnel allegedly attempted to dispose of the carcass as reported by the locals. Due to this threat, the locals hid the carcass with the aim to deliver it to IMS-METU for examination.

The necropsy of the pup was performed on 29<sup>th</sup> February 2014 at IMS-METU by authorized veterinarians. Examination revealed clear indications of malnutrition such as extremely thin blubber (1.9 cm), an empty gut with a very cachectic appearance and state. Furthermore, inspection of the events recorded by the photo-traps show no signs of the mother visiting the cave indicating that mother and pup contact had vanished. In the extensive and uninterrupted series of photographs the pup continually rests on the shore inside the cave, does not leave the cave in search of food and is neither accompanied by his mother nor breastfed.



*Figure 1. Frequency of seal activity per day in Balikh cave covering the period from January 2013 – March 2014*



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*Figure 2. The female monk seal resting on the shore in Balıklı cave - captured by photo-trap on 8 December 2013*



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*Figure 3. The pup resting on the shore in Balıklı cave - captured by photo-trap on 29 December 2013. Tragically found dead on 28th February 2014.*



***Figure 4. The pup resting on the shore in Balıklı cave - captured by photo-trap on 22 January 2014.***



***Figure 5. The last photograph taken of the seal pup (almost 90 day old) before he was found on 28th February 2014. The pup is seen resting on the shore in Balıklı cave - captured by photo-trap on 18 February 2014. The cachectic state of the pup is clearly visible. See photographs below for comparison.***



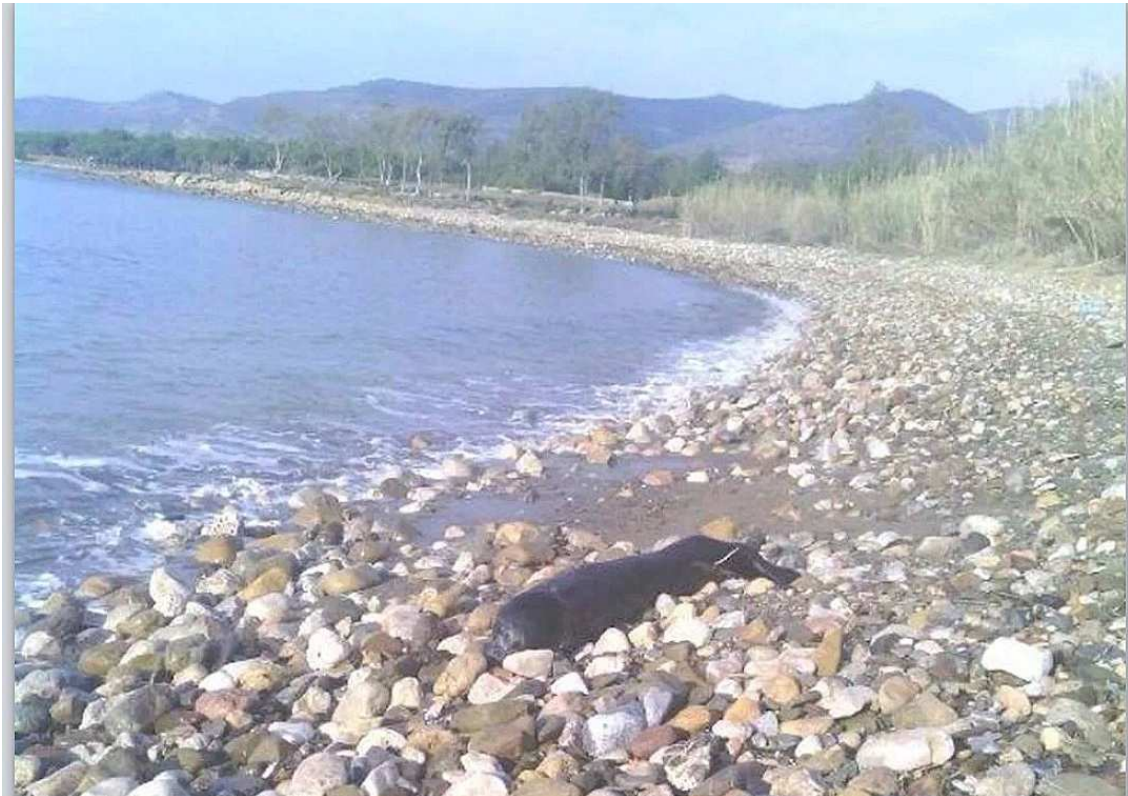


***Figure 6. The 50 day old monk seal pup born in the same cave in the previous breeding season (November-December 2012) (photographed on 15 January 2013). This pup suspiciously disappeared and has not been sighted since.***



***Figure 7. The 50 day old monk seal pup born in the same cave in the previous breeding season (2012-2013) (photographed on 15 January 2013)***





***Figure 8. The monk seal pup born in December 2013 in Yeşilovacık was tragically found dead on the beach (out of his breeding cave) close to the construction site on 28th February.***



***Figure 9. The monk seal pup tragically found dead on 28th February 2014.***





***Figure 10. The monk seal pup tragically found dead on 28th February 2014.***



***Figure 11. The monk seal pup tragically found dead on 28th February 2014. The cachectic condition of the pup is clearly visible.***

The following photos were taken to demonstrate the construction site and its development..

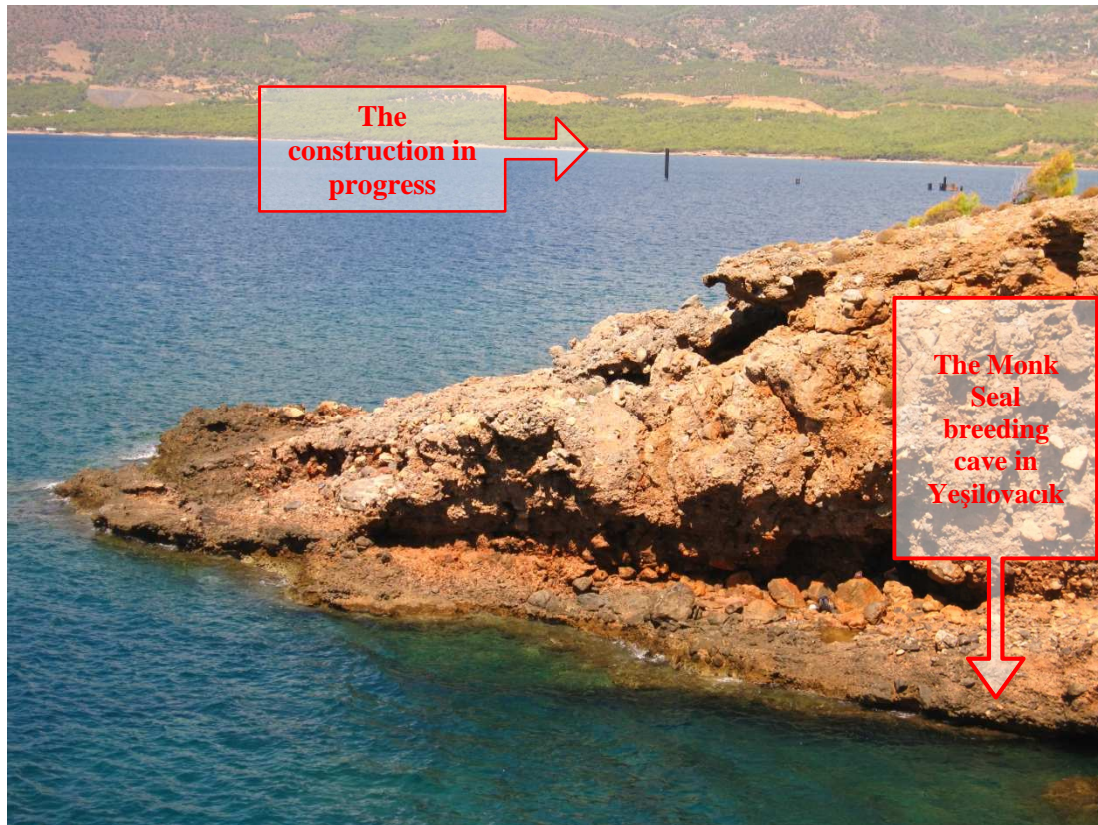
***13th May 2013:***



***5th July 2013:***







*Figure 12. Photograph taken on 20th September 2013 showing the breeding cave and the construction site within the same frame.*

**20th September 2013:**



***2nd January 2014:***





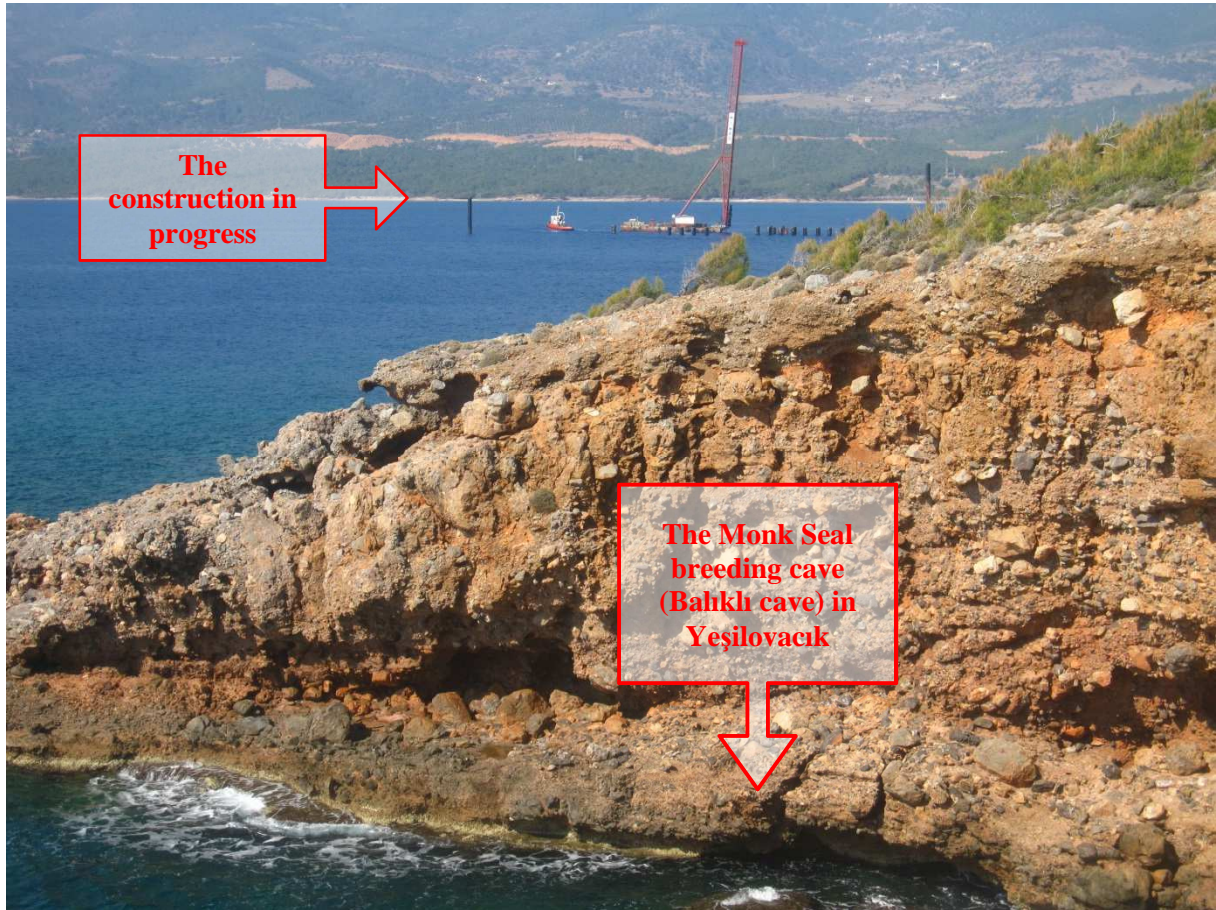
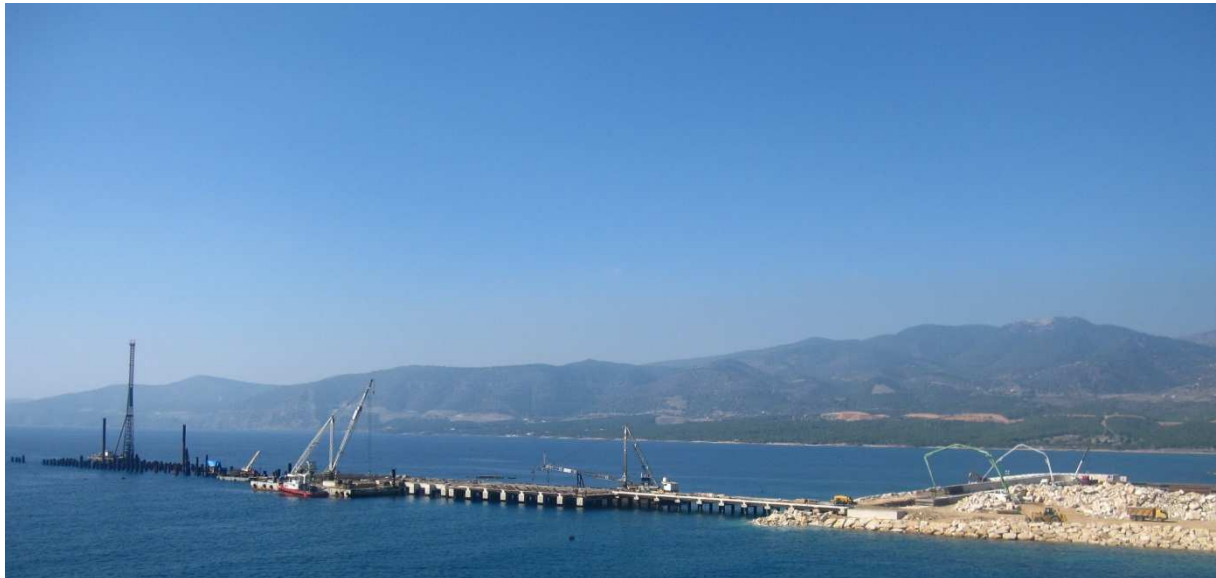


Figure 13. Photograph taken on 11th February 2014 showing the breeding cave and the construction site within the same frame.

**General view of the construction site in 11 February 2014:**



**A close-up view of the construction site in February 2014:**



**Most recent views of the construction site as of March 2014:**





