A RECORD OF A MEDITERRANEAN MONK SEAL *MONACHUS MONACHUS* FROM THE CAPE VERDE ISLANDS

by

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During February-May 1996 the authors were based on the island of Sal, Cape Verde Islands, in connection with the Cape Verde Humpback Research Project. On 23 April 1996, two US citizens, Brian Minnehan and Phillip Quimett, reported the sighting of a large seal c. 25 m off Ponta Preta beach, along the southwestern (leeward) coast of Sal. They observed the seal for about 30 minutes. Both observers are thoroughly familiar with harbour seals *Phoca vitulina* L., 1758, as they had observed that species numerous times in their home state of Washington, USA. They claimed that the seal observed on Sal was 2-3 times larger than any seal that they had ever observed in Washington. The seal was somewhat curious and frequently looked around. Unfortunately, no photographs were taken. We searched the area from the coast and at sea for several days after the reported observation, but could not relocate the animal. During the following days, local fishermen (both young and old) were interviewed about sightings of seals in the area. Only two fishermen showed any knowledge of their occurrence. Their alleged sightings had been made along the southern coast of Sal 'not very long ago'. None of the fishermen interviewed was aware of any hunting of seals on Sal or elsewhere within the Cape Verde Islands.

In view of size and behaviour as described by the observers we are convinced that the seal observed on Sal was a Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* (Hermann, 1779). Moreover, no species of seal other than Mediterranean monk seal has ever been recorded at these latitudes in the eastern Atlantic, the southernmost records of other species being from the Azores and the southern coasts of Portugal and Spain.

The only evidence for the occurrence of the Mediterranean monk seal in the Cape Verde Islands so far is a report on skeletal remains found on Sal in May 1990 (Kinzelbach & Boessneck, 1992). These authors reported at least four skeletons found along the southeastern (windward) coast of the island, where some bones were collected (cf. Boessneck & Kinzelbach, 1993: plate 8). These collected bones belonged to at least two individuals: an adult and a very young animal. In view of the condition of the skeletons, it was thought that these animals had died during the autumn of 1989. Some local fishermen interviewed by Kinzelbach & Boessneck (1992) recognized the species from pictures, but said that they had not seen any seals for many years. This is in marked contrast to information obtained from fishermen in 1996, some of whom said that they had seen seals quite recently. Furthermore, there is an entry in a popular travel guide (Matthews, 1989), stating that large seals are not uncommonly seen at sea between the islands of Sal and Boavista, but the reliability of that information has not yet been checked.

The Atlantic population of the highly threatened Mediterranean monk seal is currently estimated at c. 225 individuals (López Jurado et al., 1995), while estimates of the Mediterranean population vary from 350-1000 (Israëls, 1992) to c. 250 individuals (López Jurado et al., 1995). In the Atlantic, there still exists a small population (12-20 individuals) in the Madeiran archipelago; a larger one (possibly c. 200 individuals) at Cap Blanc, in the border area of Mauritania and Western Sahara (López Jurado et al.,

1995)[1]. Some of the areas in which the species has historically been known to occur have been difficult, or even impossible, to visit during the last decades (e.g. Algeria, Western Sahara) and the population estimates given above must therefore be regarded as tentative only. Stray animals have been reported from the Canary Islands (where the species formerly occurred but has now become extinct), Senegal, and possibly The Gambia (Maigret et al., 1976; Avella & Gonzalez, 1984; Marchessaux, 1989; López Jurado et al., 1995). In view of the recent data from the Cape Verde Islands, it seems possible that a small population still exists in these islands or that the species is at least a more or less regular visitor. The presence of a young animal among the skeletons found in 1990 may also be indicative of the existence of a local population. Future visitors to the Cape Verde Islands, particularly those visiting the eastern islands of Sal, Boavista and Maio, are therefore alerted to this possibility and urged to communicate any evidence in this connection.

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[1]Editor's note: The Cap Blanc population, estimated by Spanish researchers at c. 310 animals in early 1997, has suffered dramatic losses as a result of a massive die-off during 1997. In September 1997 the numbers here were estimated at less than 90 individuals; see Marine Mammal Society Newsletter, 5(3):1-2, September 1997.