

**MEDITERRANEAN
MONK
SEAL
CONSERVATION
PROGRAMME**



CBD-Habitat



**A Blackpool Zoo Partnership
with CBD-Habitat**





An epic story of conservation

Blackpool Zoo has been a long-term supporter of the Mediterranean Monk Seal Conservation Programme. For twenty years this programme has been dedicated to save the Mediterranean monk seal from extinction, protecting the last remaining large colony of this species on the planet. The work of the team in the field follows in the footsteps of the great explorers, naturalist and pioneers who paved the way for this ambitious project. Only a few hundred of these animals survived into the twentieth century, taking refuge in secluded caves to escape human persecution. The largest group of Mediterranean monk seals was found in three unique caves on the coast of Mauritania.



In 2001 a reserve was created to protect the caves by land and sea to prevent the seals from drowning in fishing nets and to ensure that no one disturbed the breeding sites. Today the colony has not only survived it has almost quadrupled. These are encouraging results and these successful outcomes provide hope for the next challenge. However the work is not finished. The species remains critically endangered and many threats still remain. There is a risk of new mass die-off from disease, the three caves are continually collapsing, rising sea levels threaten the breeding beaches inside the caves and the nearby town is expanding towards the colony.



Over 20 years the colony has not only survived but it has quadrupled in size



We want to create new monk seal populations in the places where they once lived and should never have left.

The challenges of today and tomorrow



FISHING VESSELS WITH GILLNETS



MARINE DEBRIS



CAVE & CLIFF COLLAPSES

The Costa de las Focas Reserve is situated on the Cabo Blanco Peninsula in Mauritania (West Africa). The 6.2 kilometre reserve contains three breeding caves which are recognised as a stronghold for the largest remaining population of Mediterranean monk seals in the world. Challenges include;

- artisanal fishing vessels and fishermen entering the reserve with fishing gear, in particular gillnets. Used to capture large amounts of fish, gillnets create a lot of damage. They kill not only the targeted species but any creature that swims into them.
- infringement from tourists and barnacle collectors who carry bags, ropes and litter. Although nets remain the most common type of infringement accounting for 88% of the activity
- risk of coastal and cave collapses

Costa de las Focas is the base of operation for the monk seal conservation project. The goals of the Costa de las Focas reserve are;

- ✓ To keep the tranquillity of the colony of the Mediterranean monk seal
- ✓ To prevent the setting of fishing gears in the marine protected area
- ✓ To assure the survival of the largest Mediterranean monk seal colony in the world

Over the last ten years Blackpool Zoo has contributed over £70,000 to support the work of this programme as it continues its efforts to save this species from extinction. This support has helped fund non-invasive tools and procedures to help this process. Tools include cameras for video and surveillance, GPS flipper tags and camera traps.



The work of CBD-Habitat supported by Blackpool Zoo

Donations to the CBD-Habitat project from Blackpool Zoo visitors has provided vital financial support to ensure vital equipment and resources are in place. To date Blackpool Zoo has raised:

£70,000

SURVEILLANCE

A total of 4,155 hours were spent in active surveillance of the reserve in 2022. The surveillance team in Cabo Blanco is made up of 5 conservation agents using 14 observatories across the reserve (split into North and South). 24/7 surveillance is achieved by agents working to eliminate threats that jeopardise the safety of the colony. Monthly reserve cleans by the agents ensure any nets, plastic and rubbish are removed and the reserve is kept clean and safe.



USING A DRONE FOR SURVEILLANCE




CBD-Habitat

2,213 hours were spent monitoring the seal caves in 2022

66 pups were born and counted in 2022

Cameras are used on a daily basis to monitor the seals inside the caves as this provides a non-invasive method of tracking births, deaths and breeding behaviour. Where this is not possible, cliff and cave suspension can be used. Conducting seal counts in and around breeding caves provides reliable data on which caves are important areas for breeding. During 2022, forty counts were taken from each cave. 119 hours was spent taking photographs in 2022

The Work of CBD-Habitat supported by Blackpool Zoo



Education and Awareness

The monk seal project has seen a significant increase in online engagement with their social media platforms across 2022 growing 72% and reaching an audience of 15,000. The project has developed an environmental education programme to provide Mauritanian youth with sustainable development skills and information on nature conservation in their environment. More than 8,000 students have already participated in the programme. Additional education activities include: reserve posters, t shirts and information boards



Mortality Detection

Conservation agents conduct weekly coastline inspections to identify and dispose of seal carcasses. Daily population monitoring also helps with identification. The results of the inspections help to understand the demographic of seals that are killed and minimise any associated threats to the colony.

Framework for Action

The Working Group of the Action Plan for the recovery of the Mediterranean monk seal is made up of relevant authorities from the four countries involved in the monk seal programme; Spain, Portugal, Morocco and Mauritania. The group decides the necessary actions that will secure the future of the remaining monk seal population. In 2022 it was agreed that the creation of a network of seal populations should be a strategic priority. CBD-Habitat play a key-role within this progressing reintroduction methods that will help establish new colonies in suitable locations.



Blackpool Zoo will continue with its efforts to ensure the monk seal conservation story continues, the challenges of today and tomorrow are faced and the Mediterranean monk seal moves away from the brink of extinction.