



Pines, olive and fig trees characterise the vegetation on the mountainous island of Alonnisos.

Nothing passes unnoticed for long in the small island harbour. The discovery of the dead Kostas was a shock for both locals and tourists.

# Death in Holiday Paradise

## Kostas the monk seal killed: the search for clues in Greece

It was a horrific discovery made by fishers on 24th July: a 1.30 metre harpoon pierced the dead body of the Mediterranean monk seal, well known to many as Kostas. The dead seal was discovered near the Greek island of Alonnisos. As a young animal, Kostas had been separated from his mother during a severe storm in 2018. Fishers found the young seal completely exhausted and starved. They contacted our partners from MOM, the Greek conservation organisation for the research and protection of the endangered Mediterranean monk seal. The seal conservationists took in and cared for the orphaned seal for several months before releasing him back into the wild (See magazine 2/2019)

After his release Kostas would regularly turn up in the harbour of the island of Alonnisos. One of his favourite resting places was boat sundecks. Last summer this lack of shyness proved to be his undoing. The deed caused international outrage and grief. EuroNatur employee Thomas Freisinger was on flexible working on the Greek mainland. When he heard about this environmental crime,

he travelled to Alonnisos to speak to the locals and assess the mood on the island. The names of those interviewed have been changed by the editors.

### Kostas surely not the only victim

Most people Thomas talked to were shocked by the news of the death of the monk seal which had spread quickly round the island.

**“Well, it’s not difficult to find out things like that as they cause quite a stir.”**

Katherina, jewellery shop owner and English teacher

**“We all profit from the seals here. Just look around, seals everywhere: as souvenirs and in the names of restaurants, ice cream parlours and bars. Many people have been coming here for years specially to see the seals.”**

Apostoli, café owner

In view of the significant revenue generated the presence of these mammals, the killing of Kostas seems even more senseless. Yet, the cohabitation of humans and animals is rarely completely conflict free. Kostas was not the only monk seal that liked to tour around the harbour of Alonnisos. Billy the seal had also lost his shyness of human beings. In contrast to Kostas, contacts with Billy sometimes ended in bloodshed. Billy had more than once bitten divers and occasionally even caused severe injuries.

“You cannot blame the animal,” said EuroNatur project leader Lisa Leschinski. “Conflict is initiated by people seeking to get close to the seals. Although monk seals look cute, they are powerful predators. Even if they are curious and playful, you should not swim up to them or, especially, try to stroke them. Would you for example walk up to a wild bear in the woods?”

Even before the killing of Kostas, Billy had already disappeared without trace. MOM employee Kimonas Koemtzopoulos assumes that this too was a similar crime. What is particularly frustrating was that we had plans for this seal. “We wanted to catch Billy and relocate him. At the seal colony at Cap Blanc in Mauretania he would have been far away from bathers and divers. The finance for the operation was already available,” according to Koemtzopoulos.



The monk seals on Alonnisos are ubiquitous on Alonnisos. Numerous eating establishments on the island use these marine mammals in their advertising.

Round picture right: The small Kostas in the rehabilitation centre in Athens. The young seal was patiently fed back to health over several months.

Alonnisos is a small island of 65 km<sup>2</sup>. The island has a population of 2700 inhabitants and belongs to the archipelago of the Northern Sporades. Most people live from tourism and some from fishing. The island is one of the main distribution areas for monk seals, and their presence is important for the tourist industry.



### Not a spontaneous act, but a deliberately planned crime.

For centuries the fishers of the Mediterranean have hunted the monk seals as they were considered harmful competitors for the fishing stocks.

**”In times gone by, when I was small, it was normal for the fishers to kill the seals. These times are thankfully in the past. Today no fisher would boast of killing one of these sea mammals.“**

Nicoletta, diving instructor

Kostas was the first proven case of the killing of a Mediterranean monk seal for more than 30 years. Fishers even benefited indirectly from the seals. Because of the occurrence of the last large seal colony in the Northern Sporades, the sea around Alonnisos was declared a marine national park in the early 1990's. EuroNatur, in conjunction with its local partner organisations, were the driving force behind this. Since this time, there has been a recovery not only in seal numbers but also in fish stocks in the protected waters.

One of the most popular pastimes around the island is harpoon fishing. It is above all Greeks from the mainland who seek out the rich fish stocks in the clear waters surrounding Alonnisos. Although conflicts with the seals are not known to occur, it was a fishing harpoon which killed Kostas. The indications are that it was not only a planned, but also a targeted killing. On investigating the weapon used, the police established that the hooks on the tip of the harpoon had been removed. This would have increased the penetrative of the harpoon that was actually designed for catching fish and crabs. The perpetrator was thus able to penetrate the seal's thick layer of fat with his weapon.



MOm conservationists investigate the body of the dead seal after removing it from the water.



Bilder: MOm





Photos: MOM

Photo: Thomas Freisinger

Kostas had lost his shyness of people. He liked to use the boats and ships in the harbour as a sundeck. For this reason, he became a kind of mascot on Alonnisos.

Photo above: The young Kostas on the beach on Alonnisos at the time of his release on February 1st 2019.

Blue sky, blue sea: the island of Alonnisos is a paradise for those in search of relaxation.

### A national park only on paper

For Kimonas, an employee of MOM, harpoon fishing carried out by people from outside is a problem. "They do not keep to the rules." Infringements of the rules are occurring more often in the national park, primarily because of the insufficient presence of marine national park rangers and police.

individuals, not as an organisation. This does, of course, inhibit the willingness of people to report their neighbours if this cannot be done anonymously."

In addition to the small fishers, Alonnisos also has a fishing fleet with four vessels. The trawlers are not allowed to fish in the national park, but even this ban is often not respected. "The water protection police are chronically underfunded and barely have enough money for petrol for their boats," says Dimitrios Gerakis. "In many respects the national park is unfortunately a paper park."

"This problem of paper parks is known in nearly all areas of the globe. Paper parks are those which are recorded on maps and legally protected, but which on the ground barely offer real protection," says Lisa Leschinski from EuroNatur. "Despite all the problems in the marine national park of the Northern Sporades, the situation is not that bad and, overall, the seals are doing very well there. However, when we create new protected marine areas in the Adriatic to allow the return of the monk seals in this part of the Mediterranean, we must insist right at the beginning on clear guidelines and the securing of finance," according to the wildlife biologist.

Of the perpetrator there is still no trace. Despite the high reward, which MOM and other organisations have offered for clues in the Costa case, there have so far been no useful leads given to the police.

*Text: Christian Stielow; Translation: Iain Macmillan*

**"They neither have the infrastructure nor the economic capacity to carry out the necessary number of checks."**

Alexandros, diving instructor and biologist

In theory there is a coherent concept underlying the national park. There are two zones: one where a small amount of angling and fishing, including harpoon fishing, is permitted, and the other, the core zone where boats may indeed enter, but only for the observation of wildlife above and below the water. But many people do not observe these rules, checks are rare, and the consequences of being caught are almost non-existent.

In the conversation with Thomas Freisinger, the seal conservationist, Dimitrios Gerakis, indicates another problem: "It is not just a matter of money. In Greece there is also a problem with the authorities: the national park rangers who carry out the checks do not have the power to impose fines. They have to phone the water protection police and report the misdemeanour as private