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Historical notes on Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* in Italian zoos



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Abstract

The present paper reviews available data concerning the capture and exhibition of live Mediterranean monk seals in Italian zoos and other scientific institutions. Hopefully this may provide further data concerning monk seals management and on the extent of past human exploitation that may be valuable for the conservation of this unique species.

Keywords: captive husbandry; Italy; zoos; exploitation

Very few appears to have been published concerning Mediterranean monk seals held in captivity in Italian zoos. There is generally reference to only one specimen held at the Giardino Zoologico in Oria (Brindisi) in 1965 (Rigas & Ronald, 1985). Actually very little has been historically published about this species in Italy, including captive individuals. It is not easy to understand the reason for such lack of interest. Possibly this was due to a general lack of enthusiasm for native species compared to that created even by common exotic species. Rightly it has been stated that so far available data on living captured monk seals are only the tip of the iceberg (Johnson, 2003).

However, a number of observations and data are scattered along little-known technical papers, so it seems worthwhile to assemble all available data in one paper. Additional information was also retrieved from museum collections. Some valuable data has also been published recently (Klinger, 2010) on the history of observations of the species in the Adriatic sea. This paper evidenced the long tradition of live monk seals exhibition existing in parts of Italy in the XVIII Century, particularly developed by Venetians in the Island of Cherso. It is not casual that this Island is the type locality of both *Phoca monachus* Hermann, 1779 and *Phoca albiventer* Buffon, 1782, both names based on captive seals exhibited in France (Klinger & Perco, 2011). This was evidently a well-established activity of which we find evidences also in Italian zoological museum collections. For instance, Alessandrini

(1819) studied the aborted foetus by an adult seal from Dalmatia and exhibited in Bologna in July 1819. Interestingly, it seems that these early seal-tamers often obtained valuable results in achieving survivorship of captured monk seals that are in sharp contrast with the poor results reported in the modern literature including those reported below. For an interesting overview on early accounts on monk seals husbandry in travelling shows see also [Johnson \(2004\)](#). On the other hand, monk seals were little-appreciated animals and we would wait until 1935 to have a paper dealing with conservation of the species in Italy ([Del Lungo, 1935](#)).

Results

In [Table 1](#) we list nine monk seals that we were able to find enough data concerning their date of capture, age class, sex and date of death. This is probably a small portion of the total of live-captured monk seals in the period from 1929-1965. [Del Lungo \(1935\)](#) cites the fact that in June 1935, two seals were captured at Dorgali (Sardinia) and acquired by some tourists, their whereabouts is ignored. Live monk seals were captured well before their formal descriptions and not only in Cherso. In Bologna, Aldrovandi had observed a living Mediterranean seal before 1638 that he described later ([Johnson, 2004](#)).

Monk seals also lived in zoos well before 1929. [Lessona \(1889\)](#) reported one individual from the Adriatic sea reaching the Royal Zoological garden in Turin, an institution active in the period 1865-1875, but it survived for a short period. [Bellingeri \(1848\)](#) studied the anatomy of a young '*Phoca vitulina*' that died at the Stupinigi Menagerie near Turin. Bellingeri doesn't say anything about the geographic origin but probably it belonged to the Mediterranean species.

Monk seals captures continued after the Second World War, as is well-known with the infamous case of the Sardinian pup that was transported in Rome to be photographed in the Fontana di Trevi in 1951 (he died lately in the Zoological Garden). In another incident in 1953, a juvenile seal was captured for a German zoo on the island of Tavolara, Sardinia, but reportedly died as buyers and sellers engaged in protracted haggling over the price ([Johnson, 2004](#)). [Toschi \(1965\)](#) observed a living monk seal at a national fair in Cagliari in 1954. No records regarding behaviour and management of live seals seem to have been published. [Tamino \(1946, 1952\)](#) included observations on monk seals in his report on the swimming behaviour of captive seals observed at the Giardino Zoologico in Rome ([Photos 1 and 2](#)).

Museum data

The unpublished thesis of [Venturino \(1989\)](#) offered a valuable overview on monk seal specimens in Italian museums and additional data on the history of the exhibitions of live individuals.

In the Museo Zoologico of Naples University "Federico II" there is the skull of a juvenile that had belonged to the collection of Oronzio Gabriele Costa. It belongs to a monk seal captured at Gallipoli and exhibited until its death in January 1854 ([Maio & Picariello, 2000](#)).

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