Conservation news

Restricted access zone declared in Greece to protect monk seals (perhaps)

Despite showing signs of recovery, the Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* remains one of the most threatened marine mammals, with numbers surviving in the Mediterranean Sea estimated to be < 600 individuals. The uninhabited c. 500 m wide islet of Formicula in Greece contains key monk seal habitat, with > 40 individuals identified along its shores. Formicula is included in a Special Area of Conservation established to protect marine habitats and species of European importance. Because of the presence of the seals it is also part of the IUCN's Ionian Archipelago Important Marine Mammal Area.

Despite the formal conservation designation, the monk seals of Formicula are not adequately protected. The potential for close encounters with the seals has resulted in the waters around the islet becoming a popular tourist destination. Chartered and privately owned boats are free to go anywhere along the island's coast, at any time and for any length of time. On a single day in August 2024, we counted > 50 boats simultaneously in the waters around the islet. We observed visitors searching for seals, chasing them in kayaks and paddle boards, swimming with them, and entering the caves where the seals breed. On two occasions we witnessed tourists entering caves sheltering newborn seal pups. In both cases, the pups were not seen again.

Concern that excessive tourist pressure could lead the seals to abandon the area prompted us to recommend the inclusion of a special protection regime for Formicula in the Special Area of Conservation draft management plan, currently under consideration. Our proposed actions include the delimitation of a 200 m wide no-entry zone along the islet's coast, with the exception of a corridor to allow access to a single mooring, under condition of compliance with a code of conduct and a time limitation.

Tourists on board a rental boat near Formicula, motoring at high speed close to two Mediterranean monk seals *Monachus monachus*. Photo: Joan Gonzalvo/Tethys.

As a result of pressure and lobbying by civil society, including initiatives by iSea, Tethys and Blue Marine Foundation, a decision by the Minister of the environment was adopted on 31 December 2024, establishing a strict protection regime around Formicula, including a no-entry zone (decision ΥΠΕΝ/ΔΔΦΠΒ/123711/3066). However, such protection does not exclude vaguely-defined fishing within the no-entry zone, a loophole that opens the door to indiscriminate access and undermines the measure's effectiveness.

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Laukahi Network completes ex situ gap analysis of Hawaiian plants

The flora of the Hawaiian Islands has a high rate of endemism and yet a high number of recorded extinctions, with over half of all taxa at risk. Laukahi: The Hawai'i Plant Conservation Network coordinates conservation efforts through the Hawai'i Strategy for Plant Conservation (laukahi.org/hawaii-strategy-for-plant-conservation), which is adapted from the Global Strategy for Plant Conservation.

In April 2024, Laukahi completed an ex situ gap analysis of 868 species of conservation importance by examining the inventories of seed banks, nurseries, a micropropagation laboratory and living collections from 50 government agencies, nonprofits, community groups and private individuals. Species present in at least one inventory were considered secured, and those not present in any inventory as unsecured. Each facility received a score for each species based on the representativeness of its extant wild plant collection, on a scale of 1–5 (Weisenberger & Keir, 2014, *Pacific Science*, 68, 525–536).

Ex situ collections secure 85% of species of conservation importance, exceeding previous assessments and the global target of 75%, although only 68% of species are duplicated, slightly short of the global target of 75%. Of the 129 unsecured species, 46 are categorized as threatened on the IUCN Red List, and 33 species have ≤ 50 individuals in the wild and are protected by Hawai'i's Plant Extinction Prevention Program. Since 2020, only