



ANNUAL REPORT 2015

Who we are

The Greek Sea is one of the most important biodiversity hotspots of Europe, hosting rare species of cetaceans and mammals, from common dolphins, to sperm whales and unique flora such as seagrass meadows. According to the IUCN Red List these rare species are all threatened with extinction. The Mediterranean monk seal *Monachus monachus* for example, is an endangered marine mammal and almost half of its population is found in the area of Greece.

“Thalassa” meaning sea in Greek is a non-profit environmental organisation established in 2013, promoting conservation and sustainability of the Mediterranean, especially in the area of Greece. We are devoted to the preservation of marine habitats through actions and policies ensuring sustainable development.

Blue Islands of Greece

Thalassa Foundation’s holistic approach to marine conservation

Greek islands constitute a driving force for the Greek economy, by attracting thousands of visitors every year who enjoy their beautiful landscapes and hospitality. Due to their commercial significance, the risk of their environmental degradation is substantial. The aim of *“Blue Islands”* is to preserve their marine natural reserves and engage local communities in pursuing sustainable growth and enhance their natural and cultural heritage from an eco-friendly perspective.

“Blue Islands” aims at preserving the marine natural reserves of Greek islands. Under this aim lies our 2015 **“Blue Alonissos”** project consisting of several targeted conservation actions.

Blue Alonissos

A replicable example

Thalassa Foundation works to make Alonissos a strong conservation example by engaging the local community, eventually leading the island's residents to experience the benefits of a circular economy as a means for sustainable development. The Foundation's greater aim is to replicate any or all of the Alonissos' projects in other Greek islands.

Alonissos is an island of remarkable marine biodiversity. It has one of the largest marine parks in Europe, which hosts a large variety of rare and endangered species i.e. monk seals, dolphins and other cetaceans. The heart of the Marine Park, is designated as a strictly protected area and one of the most important nature reserves of the Mediterranean monk seal, with almost 1/4 of their total population found in the area.

Alonissos' residents having realized the importance of the island's natural reserves are ready to follow an ecotouristic model of development.

In order to achieve a pioneering new standard, **Thalassa Foundation** is col-

Alonissos pioneers in terms of environmental preservation and embraces an ecotourism model of development

laborating with two well-known organisations, *MOm/The Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk* and the *Mediterranean SOS Network*.

The ambitious project "**Plastic Bag-Free Alonissos**", also actively supported by the Municipality of Alonissos, aims to considerably reduce the use of plastic carrier bags in an island of high environmental value, hence contributing to the protection of its coastal and marine environment, while, at the same time, earmarking Alonissos as an alternative tourism destination.

More specifically:



The official launch of the project took place with three voluntary cleanups which were realised in Alonissos and in two islets which are also part of the National Marine Park of Alonissos, Northern Sporades (NMPANS). During the clean-ups, more than 5,500 litres of waste were collected and recorded based on the scientific protocol developed by the Laboratory of Marine Geology and Physical Oceanography of the University of Patras, Greece. This first group of actions also included a school clean-up involving almost 100 students and teachers from the Nursery and the Primary School of Alonissos.

These first actions highlighted the problem that light carrier bags cause substantial harm to the environment and sea life and exposed the various impacts on the eco-system to the local community.

The first feedback was very encouraging, since it appeared that locals have a very active involvement in the project. Deliberations with stakeholders i.e. the municipality, local shopkeepers and residents of the island were the first steps of the venture. Meetings and exchange of ideas occurred during events that took place during the Autumn of 2015. This fact, in combination with the very positive tourists' feedback that were collected through a questionnaire survey at MOM's Information Centre during the summer of 2015 (visited by more than 10.000 people each summer), set the foundations and pace for future actions.



December 1st, 2015 was a crucial milestone of the project with the Alonissos Municipality having announced that local businessmen should stop providing plastic carrier bags free of charge. **Thalassa Foundation** offered 2.000 cotton bags that were distributed to shops along with the informational leaflet, while posters were placed at the entrance of many shops to alert consumers.

The project has gained immense publicity on a national (and international) level and we've had substantial positive feedback, with more Greek islands expressing interest in adopting similar practices against plastic bag pollution. A strong example is Sifnos, a quite popular Greek island that has recently taken significant action against plastic bag use. Local residents and visitors are

now encouraged to have reusable bags while shopping, in order to keep the island clean from plastic waste. Cleanups that were realised in Alonissos beaches indicated that plastic is the most common type of human-generated waste and more often than not, it ends up in the sea.

Thalassa Foundation is committed in following through and supporting in every possible way any future projects that will bring other islands one step closer to being part of the foundation's umbrella aim "Blue Islands".

Thalassa Foundation's initiative is in line with the guidelines of European Legislation regarding plastic bag use control. More specifically, according to a new European Directive, 2015/720, Member States are required to reduce the use of plastic carrier lightweight bags significantly in the next few years. It is estimated that in Greece approximately 240 plastic bags are used per capita, when, by 2019, the limit will be set to 90. The environment can no longer suffer the consequences of our footprint.

The "Alonissos Plastic Bag Free" project's life cycle extends to September

2016. Thus, within this period, there is an array of actions that are ongoing, such as the 3-day participatory actions organised by the Mediterranean SOS Network and the MOM-Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the

Mediterranean Monk Seal (already concluded in early April 2016).

These participatory actions included an open discussion among all stakeholders which soon resulted in the formation of a Coordinating Committee (April 28th), Educational sessions in schools and an interactive seminar delivered to school teachers. Next actions include more clean-ups, the second round of open discussions and possibly a meeting of all interested mayoral representatives that have already shown interest in following Alonissos' example.

The Mediterranean Monk Seal is back in the Argosaronikos" project

(launched March 2014)

Until some 6 years ago, it was believed that the monk seal is not found in human-populated areas. However, in recent years this belief changed, due to the ever increasing reports of monk seal sightings in the Argosaronikos area. This led the Stavros Niarchos Foundation and **Thalassa Foundation** to co-finance the Argosaronikos Project undertaken by MOM (The Hellenic Society for the Study and Protection of the Monk Seal). The purpose of the project is to monitor and record the population of the monk seal - an endangered species, in the Argosaronikos area, carry out scientific research and raise public awareness. The project aims to determine through observation and research of the monk seal population and its re-

production habits what has brought about this behavioural change. **Thalassa Foundation** has supported this worthwhile project which will be completed in June 2016.

Outcomes of the Argosaronikos project so far:

- ✓ Until now more than 1300 km of coastline have been mapped and the most reproductive caves have been identified. Scientific research regarding the most important monk seal breeding habitats has been carried out by using infra-red cameras placed in caves of Makronisos and Spetses.



- ✓ Also, by delivering questionnaires to local fishermen, MOM recorded the interaction between monk seals and fishermen in several coastal areas of Attica. The islands of Argosaronikos area (Hydra, Poros, Spetses) are next in line for delivery of questionnaires and then all data will be analysed.



- ✓ The project includes several information and sensitization actions. The *educational toolkit* addressed to local nursery and primary school students has been already presented to 100 educators. Furthermore, through a number of open participatory events the public has been exposed to issues regarding local biodiversity and found out more about how to protect the marine environment and how to react in case of encountering a monk seal.

- ✓ A large-scale photo contest was organized and the production of a 30 minute video featuring the monk seal in Argosaronikos is already under way. Also, the project has its own [Facebook page](#), and is featured in a [special section](#) of MOM's website.

Last, the project will be officially concluded on June 29th, 2016 with a ceremony hosting a photo exhibition on Argosaronikos from June 28 to June 30th.



Thalassa Foundation will always regard the protection of the marine environment through sustainable development as a crucial priority for humankind and will thus never cease investigating and supporting best practices and ways to engage local communities to also serve this purpose.

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