



## MONK SEAL PHILATELY

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Like numerous other species the world over, the monk seal is no stranger to the philatelic world. Portraits of the Mediterranean, Caribbean and Hawaiian monk seals adorn stamps issued by nations as far afield as Russia and Tanzania, Cuba and Albania.

The postage stamp first saw the light of day in 1840 and since then, according to the Society of Topical Philately in Belgium, hundreds of millions of these tiny, perforated pieces of paper have been dabbed against the human tongue and affixed to letters and parcels.

While stamp collecting has never enjoyed a particularly glamorous or stirring reputation, aficionados are said to number in the millions, generating attractive profits even for the postal services of developing nations that design, print and issue their own special series and first day covers.

Part of the fascination of stamp collecting is undoubtedly the ability of these vivid miniature designs to acquaint the armchair traveller with some of the world's most romantic, exotic, and faraway places, and with the people, animals and plants that populate them. Stamps are used to commemorate, to further humanitarian campaigns, to boast of scientific or technological achievement, and to educate.

Therein lies philately's Achilles heel. Because stamps are issued by official government agencies they, their designs and the descriptions that normally accompany first day covers, assume a kind of erudite prestige. If philatelic depictions of the Mediterranean, Hawaiian and Caribbean monk seals are anything to go by, however, such confidence proves unwarranted. In many cases, representations of these endangered and – in the case of *Monachus tropicalis* – extinct species, are imbued with a liberal dose of artistic license, effortlessly transforming monk seals into sea lions or other pinnipeds, placing them in alien or unfamiliar habitat, or rechristening them with obsolete scientific names.

Yet paradoxically, it is precisely these errors and imperfections that shed further light on the human-seal relationship – in much the same way that a Renaissance woodcut may say more about contemporary natural history than about the monk seal as a living, breathing species. The stamp images of the monk seal and the descriptions accompanying them become a miniature mirror of society's attitudes, superstitions and misconceptions surrounding these animals.

In fact, almost every stamp in the monk seal collection has a story to tell. First, misnaming. A 1961 stamp from Bulgaria describes the Mediterranean monk seal as *Monachus pelagius*, an obsolete taxonomic synonym for the species first coined by François Cuvier in 1824 (Johnson & Lavigne, in prep.). Similarly, a stamp issued by Albania in 1999 depicts a *Monachus albiventris*, a corruption of *Monachus albiventer*, a synonym most often associated with the 18th century Dutch physician and taxonomist P. Boddaert (see [Monk seals commemorated \(sort of\)](#), TMG 2(2): November 1999). Where *Monachus tropicalis* is concerned, Cuba provides a correct scientific name, but also cites the Caribbean monk seal's colloquial alter ego as *Foca Antillana* or the "Seal of the Antilles."

While some artists have done their homework in faithfully reproducing the monk seal's distinctive features – its broad head and white belly patch, for example – others appear to have looked no further than the pinniped model most conveniently at hand. Mauritania's 1973 stamp appears to feature a sea lion head (a blunder more than made up for in its exemplary monk seal series in 1986), while Yugoslavia's 1983 issue, recording the species' presence in the Kornati archipelago, depicts a phocine seal rather than monachine seal.

When the monk seal was adopted as the official mascot of the 1979 Mediterranean Games in Split, host nation Yugoslavia issued a stamp depicting a stylish sea lion apparently howling at the sky. Whether the artist was trying to convey a statement about the seal's likely fate will probably forever remain in doubt. Although it was regarded as the most endangered species in the country at the time (Gamulin-Brida 1979), official apathy and negligence ensured its effective extinction in the Adriatic within a decade (Johnson & Lavigne 1999b).

Occasionally, it is the first day cover that betrays the stamp artist. A Fleetwood cover accompanying a reasonably accurate 1994 United Nations stamp of *Monachus monachus* depicts a species that appears to be stuck in a transgenic shift between sea lion, bird and extraterrestrial. Turkey's recent offering commemorating the year 2000 depicts the nation's critically endangered species with a modest smile, presumably in greeting the new millennium (sic) rather than with any particular confidence in government efforts to protect it.








Fleetwood first day cover, UN Vienna 1994





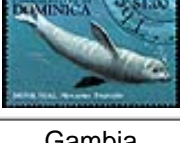







But if artists are getting the wrong picture, imagine the confusion of the general public and the stamp collecting fraternity. The Mediterranean monk seal is generally depicted in idyllic, pristine surroundings without a fisher, a hunter or tourist development in sight. Albania (1999), Greece (1990), Madeira (1993) Portugal (1983), Tunisia (1986) and Gulf Emirate Umm Al Qiwain (1972) show seals basking happily on sandy shores or wave-splashed rocks, despite the fundamental deterioration in habitat that has historically driven the species away from open beaches (Johnson & Lavigne 1999a, 1999b; for the monk seal's recent return to beaches on Madeira's strictly protected Desertas Islands, see [Monachus Science](#), this issue).

The same kind of picture emerges from the Caribbean, where Antigua and Barbuda depict a plump, delighted seal on a deserted coral beach, apparently oblivious to its species' looming demise. In contrast, Grenada's *Monachus tropicalis* at least stares back at you with a kind of forlorn reproach.

Tunisia must win the prize for the most inadvertently ironic of all monk seal stamps. Its 1986 issue commemorates the creation of the Zembretta National Park and its protection of *Monachus*. Alas, the Park's population of seals was already extinct by the time the stamp was rolling off the presses (Aguilar 1998).



There are several other curious anomalies in our monk seal collection. Tanzania and Umm Al Qiwain have both issued commemorative monk seal stamps even though the species have never graced their respective territories. In contrast, the Croatians, Cypriots, French, Israelis, Libyans and Moroccans have apparently deemed their struggling or extinct specimens unworthy of such philatelic honour. In the post Cold War thaw, Russians apparently saw fit to take the middle ground. Instead of commemorating their own extinct monk seal in the Crimean Black Sea, they issued a 1993 stamp honouring the seal of their erstwhile enemy, the Hawaiian monk seal, *Monachus schauinslandi*...

Country	Theme	Year of Issue	Series Subject	Value	Scott Number
Albania 	<i>Monachus albiventris</i>	1999	Foka e Mesdheut, Monk seals	110/150 l.	N/A
Algeria 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1981	Monk seal and Macaque	60 c.	672
Antigua & Barbuda 	<i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1982	Centenary of Death of Charles Darwin	\$5	662
Antigua & Barbuda 	<i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1989	Wildlife	45 c.	1234
Bulgaria 	<i>Pelagius monachus</i>	1961	Black Sea Fauna	2 s.	1164

Bulgaria 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1991	Marine Mammals	1 l.	3669
Bulgaria 	<i>Monachus-monachus</i>	1998	International year of the Ocean	120 l.	4049
Colombia 	<i>Foca del Caribe (Monachus tropicalis)</i>	1988	Fauna	35 p.	964
Cuba 	<i>Monachus tropicalis, Foca Antillana</i>	1980	Marine Mammals	30 c.	2337
Dominica 	Monk seal, <i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1998	UNESCO International Year of the Ocean	\$1	2085
Gambia 	Monk seal, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	1997	Endangered species	1.50 d.	1870
Greece 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1990	Rare and endangered species	90 dr.	1676
Grenada 	Caribbean monk seal, <i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1990	Wildlife	10 c.	1820
Grenada Grenadines 	<i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1990	Wildlife	\$6	1162
Grenada Grenadines 	"Seal" <i>Monachus tropicalis (?)</i>	1998	UNESCO International Year of the Ocean	75 c.	2042
Italy 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1978	Il Mare deve Vivere	170 l.	1319
Karjala [A 'Cinderella' issue] 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1996	"RFHTKBZ"	2000	N/A

Mauritania 	Phoque moine, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	1973	Monk seal and pup	40 fr.	300
Mauritania 	Phoque moine, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	1973	Seal's head	135 fr.	C130
Mauritania 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1986	WWF Monk Seal Series	2, 5, 10, 18 & 50 um.	597-600
Portugal 	Lobo Marinho, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	1983	Endangered Marine Mammals	12.50 e.	1575
Portugal – Madeira 	Lobo Marinho, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	1993	Nature Preservation	42 e.	168-171
Russia 	<i>Monachus schauinslandi</i>	1993	Wildlife	250 r.	6185
Spain 	Audouin's Gull and monk seal ( <i>phoca monge</i> ).	1978	Protection of endangered fauna	20 p.	2100

<p>St. Thomas and Prince Islands</p> 	<i>Monachus monachus</i>	1995	Protection of world's endangered species	2000 d.	N/A
<p>St. Vincent</p> 	Caribbean monk seal	1989	Christopher Columbus. Discoveries in the Caribbean 1492-1504	50 c	SS12331
<p>St. Vincent</p> 	[Caribbean] monk seal	1995	Marine fauna	90 c	2177
<p>Tanzania</p> 	<i>Monachus tropicalis</i>	1994	Endangered species	250 sh.	1291
<p>Tanzania</p> 	<i>Monachus</i> (?)	N/A	N/A	300 sh	N/A
<p>Tunisia</p> 	<i>Phoque moine</i> , Parc National de Zembra et Zembretta	1986	Wildlife, Natl. Parks	350 d.	908
<p>Turkey</p> 	Akdeniz Foku, <i>Monachus monachus</i>	2000	Millennium	300,000 l.	N/A
<p>Umm Al Qiwain</p> 	Monk seal	1972	Endangered Species	1 r.	1370-1385
<p>United Nations (Vienna, Austria)</p> 	<i>Monachus monachus</i> (Mönchsrobbe)	1994	CITES 1994	7 s.	164
<p>USA</p> 	<i>Monachus schauinslandi</i>	1996	Endangered species	32 c.	3105

 <p>Yugoslavia 100 jugoslavija</p>	<p>Monk seal, symbol of the Split 1979 Games</p>	<p>1979</p>	<p>8<sup>th</sup> Mediterranean Games</p>	<p>1 d.</p>	<p>RA 58-59</p>
 <p>Yugoslavia 15 JUGOSLAVIJA</p>	<p>Monk seal</p>	<p>1982</p>	<p>Kornati Islands National Park</p>	<p>15 d.</p>	<p>1585</p>

**In the interests of completeness, the authors would like to hear from anyone who may have come across a monk seal stamp that does not appear in the above listing.**

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