

## Early records of *Neomonachus tropicalis* (Gray, 1850) in Venezuela (Mammalia, Pinnipedia: Phocidae)

### Registros antiguos de *Neomonachus tropicalis* (Gray, 1850) en Venezuela (Mammalia, Pinnipedia: Phocidae)

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*Hombres marinos flotando en aguas de Cubagua al amanecer.*  
Di Donato Salazar 1995: 85

The Jamaican seal or Caribbean monk seal, *Neomonachus tropicalis* (Gray, 1850), a pinniped mammal of the American Tropical Atlantic, has been declared extinct several times (Timm *et al.* 1997, Adam & García 2003, McClenachan & Cooper 2008, Scheel *et al.* 2014, Jørgensen 2021, Luna-Pérez & Cuevas-Cardona 2022, CITES 2024). It was described by Gray (1850: 28-29) based on an incomplete skin from Jamaica, when only small groups survived in some isolated points of its former distribution area (McClenachan & Cooper 2008). Its unfortunate disappearance is attributed, with good historical evidence, to indiscriminate hunting and the greed of collectors (McClenachan & Cooper 2008, Jørgensen 2021). The species was also considered extinct in the Venezuelan Caribbean (Rodríguez & Rojas-Suárez 2008: 362-363), but a few years later its name was not even included in the Red Book of Venezuelan fauna (Rodríguez *et al.* 2015). In fact, until now, no authentic report of the presence of *N. tropicalis* in Venezuela had ever been recognized. Past records and archaeological findings demonstrate that this seal was present in the Netherlands Antilles near the Venezuelan coast (van Grol 1934, Harviser 1987, 1994, van Bree 1994, De-brot 2000). Based on toponymic information, Adam &

García (2003: 317) presumed its possible historical occurrence in two Venezuelan localities, Cerro El Lobo (Carabobo state, highly improbable) and Isla Lobos or Isote Los Lobos (Sucre state, see Balda 1963). This information was echoed by McClenachan & Cooper (2008: 1355, fig. 3). In 2009, one of the authors (ALV) visited the towns of Guayacán, Chacopata, and Isla Caribe, not far from Isla Lobos, where some fishermen did indeed recognize that the name of the islet derives from the ancient presence of “lobos marinos” on the site. None of them attested to having encountered this animal, only hearing references from their ancestors.

The extraordinary work *De Orbe Novo*, by the Italian Renaissance humanist and chronicler of the Indies, Pietro Martire d'Anghiera (1457-1526), written in epistolary format very early in the 16<sup>th</sup> century, and published in parts (called “decades”, because each one consists of ten chapters), contains in its eighth decade the narrative of an episode that occurred on the Venezuelan coast of Araya, near the present-day town of Santa Fé de Chiribichí. It is an incident clearly referring to the sighting of a monk seal by Spanish sailors, who mistook it for a triton, a monster from Greco-Roman mythology, half man and half fish

(Martire d'Angheria 1530: 109-111). Another sighting of a similar monster on Cubagua Island is also mentioned. The aforementioned text is well known and has been translated into several languages, modernized, and published numerous times. Because of its fidelity to the text in Latin of the first printing, we cite the English translation by M. Lok, from an edition published in London in 1612 (Martire d'Anghiera 1612: 300):

*“Next vnto the Chiribichenses lyeth the country of Ataya [sic], along by the shoares whereof the Spanyardes sayled, they who cast their eyes farre into the Sea, the rest eyther playing, or else idle, saw an unknowne and strang thing, swimming aboute water, and considering with fixed eye what it shoulde bee, confidently affirmed they sawe the hayry head of a man with a thicke bearde, and that it hadd armes. While they quietly behelde afarre off, the Monster securely wandred heere, and there, wanderinge at the sight of the shippe, but raying their companions with exceedinge loude outcryes, and exclamation, the monster hearing the sounde of the voyce was terrified, and diued vnder Water, and shewed that parte of the body which was hidden vnder the water, and beholding the tayle, they obserued it to bee like the tayle of a fishe, with the shaking, and flapping whereof it made that place of the calme sea full of waues, or surges. Wee thinke them to bee the Tritones, which fabulous antiquitie calleth Neptunes trumpeters. At the Ilande Cubagua, famous for the fishing of pearle, neere to the Ilande of Margarita, many reported, that another monster of that kinde was seene there.”*

Authors who later refer to this early testimony are mistaken when they reinterpret it as the appearance of a fabulous creature (León Pinelo 1943: 117-118), a lying story or a fantasy from the imagination of ignorant navigators (Walker 2005: 33, Llano Zapata 2005: 556). Babarro (2010: 7-8) gives credit to the observation, but confuses the identity of the animal with a manatee (an aquatic mammal with other distinctive physical characteristics, belonging to the order Sirenia).

The skepticism of traditional historians generally obstructs the objective interpretation of unusual testimonies, particularly those from men who, more than five hundred years ago, found themselves exploring unknown contexts, sometimes with preconceived ideas based on ancient European traditions. The mention of another sea monster off the coast of Paria in an even older Italian document should not be dismissed as an imaginary story, a lie, or a fantasy. Quite the contrary, it presents evidence that would allow us to infer that in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, some animal unknown to newcomers from Europe commonly lived in

the Paria Peninsula region: “*some who were on earth, and one night one of them was caught by a sea monster and carried into the sea in front of his companions, and crying for help they were unable to help him.*” (Anonymous, [1510] in HARRISSE 1866: 479-482, in BERCHET 1893: 219-221, VANNINI DE GERULEWICZ 1974: 159). This chronicle lacks a physical description of the entity involved, merely recording a nocturnal event that can only be interpreted through knowledge of animal behavior. In the modern imagination, no strictly marine animal large and aggressive enough to come ashore to capture and abduct a human being exists. Before dismissing the matter as a lie or a fantasy tale, it is necessary to understand that the chronicle undoubtedly refers to a large, powerful, aggressive animal, capable of swimming in marine waters, but also of walking on land, and of capturing large prey, not with its claws, but with its jaws. Furthermore, it must have been strong enough to immobilize and drag a human being with it. By elimination, and given sufficient knowledge of wildlife in Venezuela, this episode most likely refers to a crocodile attack, as Babarro (2010: 5) has effectively concluded. However, knowledge of the habits of the only two species of the genus *Crocodylus* that may eventually coexist in the Gulf of Paria would allow us to go a little further and speculate, in all likelihood, that this would be the first known reference to the Orinoco crocodile, *Crocodylus intermedius* Graves, 1819.

As mentioned in the opening paragraphs of this article, modern material, testimonial, and cultural evidence most likely points to the past presence of the Caribbean monk seal in Venezuelan island territories. The aforementioned account by Martir d'Anghiera, which had never before been interpreted with criteria of zoological plausibility, provides a sufficiently reliable record of the species. However, the final precision lies in the most detailed testimonies and accurate descriptions by the renowned Spanish historian Gonzalo Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés (1478-1557), colonizer of the Americas and official chronicler of the Indies:

*“I have a memory that I have heard some of our sailors, trained in navigation, say that they have seen some of these men, or fish that look like men, and in particular I have seen two men of credit, one called the pilot Diego Martín, a native of Palos de Moguer, and another called Juan Farfan de Gaona, a native of Seville. One told me in Panama, year one thousand five hundred and twenty-seven, and another in Nicaragua, year one thousand five hundred and twenty-nine, and both said that on the island of Cubagua one of these mermen went out to sleep out of the water on the beach, and that when*

certain Spaniards came along the coast they brought two or three dogs that were ahead, and when the merman sensed them, he got up and ran in two feet into the water and jumped into the sea and hid and the dogs went after him to the water, which these Christians saw what I have mentioned, from whom I heard it. I believed it after I heard the second one; because, as I have said, they were witnesses in what they deposed, and they told it to me in the same way, being three hundred leagues away from each other, and at different times.

I heard the same Juan Farfan de Gaona and a certain Juan Gallego state, in addition to what has been said, that at the tip of Tierra-Firme, which is in the cove that enters Cumaná, from where the water is taken to the island of Pearls, called Cubagua, it happened that one of these mermen was on the sandy beach of the coast sleeping on land, and certain Spaniards and tame Indians were going up the coast, following a boat, and hit him, and with the oars they beat him to death.

He was the size of a man of medium height from the waist down, so that he was about half the height of a man, more or less, those who saw him told me and that his color was between brown and russet, his complexion was not scaly or fleshy, but smooth and with a downy of long, sparse hairs, and on his head little black hair; the noses riveted and wide, like a Guinean or black man; The mouth was somewhat large and the ears were small, and everything that was in him, limb by limb considered, was neither more nor less than a human man, except that the fingers and toes were together, but distinct, so that, although they were glued together, their joints were very well determined and the nails were very recognizable. When they hit him, he complained in that way that you feel when pigs moan or growl while they are dreaming, or when piglets suckle, and sometimes it was that sound like the one that big monkeys or simian cats make, when they touch the one they want to bite, with that murmuring or noise.” (Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés 1852: 179–180, Rioja 1941: 370, Raffo 1949: 115, Pérez-Valle 1976: 132, Medina & Becco 1992: 208, Romero 1992: 84, Weckmann 1992: 63, Sánchez 1993: 210, Panonia & Urdapilleta 1999: 16, Almoína de Carrera 2001: 117, Ramírez Alvarado 2001: 128, 2010: 369–386, 2022: 277, de Asúa & French 2005: 118, Roling 2010: 106–108, Carrillo 2022: 136–137).

It is necessary to point out that most, if not all of the authors cited, who have transcribed or repeated this passage from an extremely well-known work, written in the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century (although it was not printed in full until 1851–1855), have done so to describe the worthy

chronicler Fernández de Oviedo y Valdés as a fabulist or liar. To cite the most elaborate examples, Almoína de Carrera (2001: 117), while right in observing that the slaughter of the animal, with oars, on the beaches of Cumaná is a “moving example of dark human cruelty”, at the same time judges the valuable and unique historical testimony as a fable, “free and beautiful fantasy” of the “crónicas sucresnes”, disqualifying it even further as an invention, a product of cultural prejudice. On the other hand, de Asúa & French (2005: 118) claim that Oviedo invokes the authority of his witnesses to validate a story that is clearly fanciful. Similarly, Carrillo (2022: 136–137) speaks of Oviedo’s efforts to achieve what he calls the judicial normalization of the natural phenomenon, through his detailed “forensic” description of the physical appearance of the seaman and the precise description of the sighting site. In this work, we overturn such judgments as unnecessary.

From our renewed perspective, we also unequivocally interpret another mention of the Caribbean monk seal in the vicinity of the island of Cubagua, as it appears in the limited historical account of Francisco López de Gómara (1511–1559), a Spanish humanist and chronicler of the Indies who never crossed the Atlantic Ocean:

“There are also fish, so that there is no shortage of fables, near Cubagua, that from the top they look like men in their beards, hair, and arms.” (López de Gómara 1552: 44, 1749: 72).

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