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NOAA Must Redouble Effort to Save the Declining Hawaiian Monk Seal, Says Marine Conservation Institute

[Report](#) Lists Changes Required to Rejuvenate the Monk Seal Recovery Program

Seattle, WA—February 5, 2015— Marine Conservation Institute, a leader in protecting marine biodiversity, released a [comprehensive report](#) today calling on the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to redouble its efforts to conserve the little-known Hawaiian monk seal, the last surviving member of its biological genus. With an estimated population of 900 to 1,100 animals, the Hawaiian monk seal is one of the three most endangered seals on earth and the **most** endangered in the US. The fate of the seal, which lives only in Hawai‘i, depends primarily on how effectively NOAA Fisheries implements the federal recovery program for the seal. The report takes a detailed look at the recovery program and how it can be improved to achieve a self-sustaining population of 3,200 animals in the next several decades.

“If NOAA wants to reverse the long decline of this iconic species, it is going to have to be more aggressive,” said Dr. Lance Morgan, President of Marine Conservation Institute. “This means NOAA will have to increase its budget for the seal, focus program management on tangible objectives that keep seals alive, and request more help from other federal and state agencies and nonprofits.”

Although seals in the Main Hawaiian Islands are increasing through natural reproduction, the high mortality of seals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is causing an overall population decline of approximately 4% per year. If that trend continues, in less than 20 years the population would be halved to 450-550 seals and the species would be in an extremely precarious position,

vulnerable to disease outbreak or environmental disruption events like hurricanes or ocean warming.

“Despite the continuing decline of the population, federal spending to conserve the seal has stabilized at approximately \$4 million per year,” said the report’s author, William Chandler. “The official NOAA recovery plan calls for a budget of at least \$7 million per year to pay for a range of activities in the Northwestern and Main Hawaiian Island, but NOAA has never requested that amount from Congress,” said Chandler. “In addition to closing this gap, other agencies that have a legal responsibility for the seal’s recovery, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service and state Department of Land and Natural Resources, should be providing more funds towards recovery.”

Matthew Sproat, a fisherman, noted Hawaiian musician, and community liaison with Honua Consulting who worked with fishermen on protecting Kaua‘i’s seals with Marine Conservation Institute support, said, “The general public and fishermen have a really important role to play in saving the seal since seals are increasingly present in the main Hawaiian Islands and interact with beachgoers and recreational and subsistence fishermen.”

NOAA has attempted to prevent and mitigate the negative interactions between people and seals (i.e., beachgoers or dogs disturbing seals on beaches, fishermen accidentally hooking seals or capturing them in gillnets, and seals “socializing” with divers and swimmers), and recruit fishermen and local community leaders to help with seal management. The report documents the program’s limited success and calls for a robust community engagement program.

“In our work on Kaua‘i,” said Sproat, “we were able to listen to the concerns of Hawaiian communities and leaders and translate those concerns so that NOAA and the Department of Land and Natural Resources could more effectively address seal issues with the local communities. That’s the most effective way to do things here.”

William Chandler said, “Recovering the monk seal is not rocket science; we can do this, but NOAA has to be serious about implementing its own plan. The agency also needs to be more transparent and accountable about its activities and needs so that other agencies and nonprofits can help. If we lose the battle to save the Hawaiian monk seal, we’ll have only ourselves to blame.”

MORE

About Marine Conservation Institute

Marine Conservation Institute is a team of highly-experienced marine scientists and environmental-policy advocates dedicated to saving ocean life for us and future generations. The organization's overarching goal is to help the world create an urgently-needed worldwide system of strongly protected areas—the Global Ocean Refuge System (GLORES)—a strategic, cost-effective way to ensure future diversity and abundance of marine life. Founded in 1996, Marine Conservation Institute is a US-based nonprofit organization with offices in Seattle, near San Francisco and in Washington DC. For more information, please go to: <http://www.marine-conservation.org>

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Media Resources:

The full report, a photo gallery of public domain pictures, a YouTube video of Hawaiians talking about monk seals, and other background materials can be found at:
<http://www.marine-conservation.org/what-we-do/program-areas/mpas/pacific-islands-conservation/hawaiian-monk-seals/>

Telepress Conference access and time:

10 am HST, Noon PST, 3 pm EST (it may take a few minutes to register, so try earlier)

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“Hawaiian Monk Seal Report Release”