



MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION

10 May 2010

Mr. David M. Kennedy
Acting Assistant Administrator
Oceans and Coastal Zone Management
National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
1305 East-West Highway, Room 13632
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Mr. Kennedy:

On 2–4 December 2009 the Marine Mammal Commission held its annual meeting in Honolulu, Hawaii, to review certain marine mammal conservation issues in the Pacific Islands region. The meeting focused on cooperative efforts to recover the Hawaiian monk seal but also examined issues concerning the humpback whale and other cetaceans in the Pacific Islands region. Conservation of the monk seal and the humpback whale is directly relevant to the mission of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which includes the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve and the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. During the Commission's meeting, Mr. Bradley Barr (Senior Policy Advisor), Ms. Aulani Wilhelm (Monument co-manager), Ms. Naomi McIntosh (Sanctuary Manager), and Dr. Edward Lyman (research staff member) provided excellent presentations regarding the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and its activities and plans for both species. The following recommendations are based on discussions at the meeting.

RECOMMENDATIONS

With regard to the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument and NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, the Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries—

- continue working with the National Marine Fisheries Service to (1) evaluate accumulation rates of net debris in NWHI atoll lagoons and (2) clean up marine debris, particularly near monk seal pupping beaches, to prevent entanglement of seals;
- continue working with the National Marine Fisheries Service to accomplish Hawaiian monk seal recovery goals in the NWHI;
- support approval of a Monument permit request by the National Marine Fisheries Service to kill up to 20 Galapagos sharks at French Frigate Shoals during 2010; and
- provide, when possible, the National Marine Fisheries Service with logistics support for deploying and retrieving seasonal monk seal field camp personnel and supplies in the NWHI using the Monument's research vessel, *Hi'ialikai*.

With regard to the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, the Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries—

- add conservation of Hawaiian monk seals to the Sanctuary's purposes and assist with or carry out non-regulatory tasks in the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan, particularly those

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related to public education and outreach, involvement of volunteer networks in monk seal recovery, assisting with monk seal rescue and emergency response situations, and carrying out related research activities.

RATIONALE

The Commission offers the following rationale for its recommendations.

Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

The Papahānaumokuākea Monument includes habitat for more than 90 percent of all remaining Hawaiian monk seals. The species is found only in the Hawaiian archipelago, numbers fewer than 1,200 seals, and is declining at a rate of 4.5 percent per year.

The National Marine Fisheries Service has lead responsibility for recovery of the Hawaiian monk seal, but, because of staff and budget limitations and the breadth of recovery needs, it must rely heavily on assistance from agency partners, including the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries, to assist with or carry out many essential recovery tasks. The Sanctuary Office's co-manager for the Monument and the staff of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve have been especially helpful in addressing two of the major risk factors for monk seals in the NWHI: entanglement in marine debris and loss of pups to shark predation at French Frigate Shoals.

The effects of marine debris on monk seals are difficult to assess and mitigate. Since the 1980s biologists have found more than 300 monk seals entangled on NWHI beaches. Most are juveniles entangled in derelict nets and other fishing gear. The majority of animals found entangled on shore have been disentangled by biologists or have been able to free themselves. Undoubtedly, other seals drown after becoming entangled in nets floating at sea or caught on reefs. For the past decade, the Coral Reef Ecosystem Division of the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center has organized cooperative efforts to remove marine debris from nearshore waters in the NWHI. To supplement these efforts, the Sanctuary Office recently provided additional funds as well as logistic support from its research vessel, *Hi'ialikai*.

Removal of debris has prevented monk seal entanglements and drowning, but removing debris from an area the size of the NWHI is beyond the scope of the National Marine Fisheries Service alone, and the Service must depend on other agencies to assist with this task. The Marine Mammal Commission commends the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries and its Monument and Reserve staffs for their ongoing attention to and support for removal of debris from the NWHI. Those efforts promote conservation of Hawaiian monk seals and many other reef-associated species. The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries continue working with the National Marine Fisheries Service to (1) evaluate accumulation rates of net debris in NWHI atoll lagoons and (2) clean up marine debris, particularly near monk seal pupping beaches, to prevent entanglement of seals.

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The Office of National Marine Sanctuaries also has provided vital support to the National Marine Fisheries Service in its efforts to reduce shark predation on monk seals. Since the mid-1990s predation by Galapagos sharks in particular has removed up to one-third of all pups born each year at French Frigate Shoals. To help understand and address this problem, the Sanctuaries Office funded a multi-year study of Galapagos shark movements and behavior at the site. The results provide insight regarding the dominant role of large marine predators in the NWHI, as well as a basis for mitigating the effects of predation by removing a small, select group of sharks that frequent the waters off the main monk seal pupping beach at French Frigate Shoals.

The Marine Mammal Commission commends the scientific staff of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve for its support of monk seal-related studies, particularly those focused on shark predation at French Frigate Shoals. The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the staff of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve continue working with the National Marine Fisheries Service to identify and support studies that promote Hawaiian monk seal recovery in the NWHI. The Marine Mammal Commission further recommends that the Sanctuary Program's co-manager for the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument support approval of the Service's permit application to remove up to 20 Galapagos sharks at French Frigate Shoals during 2010.

The Monument's managers also could help the National Marine Fisheries Service deploy and retrieve annual field camps in the NWHI. Logistic support for those camps consumes resources that the Service could direct toward other important recovery-related studies and projects. The Marine Mammal Commission therefore recommends that the staff of the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve consult regularly with staff of the National Marine Fisheries Service to coordinate deployment and retrieval of seasonal monk seal field camps in the NWHI with the cruise schedule for the Monument's research vessel, *Hi'ialikai*.

Finally, the Commission understands that the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries has provided funding to maintain the state's position of Monument co-manager after that position was vacated. The Marine Mammal Commission commends the Sanctuary Office for providing such support.

Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary

The humpback whale sanctuary encompasses habitat for what is probably the largest winter concentration of breeding and calving humpback whales in the world. The whales found off Hawaii disperse to different summer feeding grounds, principally in Alaska and Canada, and their number has been increasing steadily. Although conservation of humpback whales is at the core of the Sanctuary's mission, Sanctuary boundaries also enclose important habitat for other marine mammals, including a growing population of Hawaiian monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands.

With regard to humpback whales, Sanctuary staff briefed the Commission on work to disentangle whales and mitigate the impact of ship strikes. Those efforts are saving whales and

allowing population recovery at a rate faster than would otherwise be possible. The Marine Mammal Commission commends the Sanctuary staff for its dedicated work on these difficult issues.

Sanctuary staff also briefed the Commission on results of (1) a research project (Structure of Populations, Levels of Abundance, and Status of Humpback Whales, or SPLASH) to investigate humpback whales throughout the Pacific region and (2) the First International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas. The broad international scope of those two efforts is fitting and noteworthy. Scientists from many countries contributed to SPLASH, but Dr. David Mattila warrants special recognition for his efforts to organize and coordinate the project. The results have greatly enhanced understanding of humpback whale populations throughout the Pacific. Similarly, the Sanctuary deserves great credit for organizing and convening the First International Conference on Marine Mammal Protected Areas. The conference provided an important opportunity for managers to share experience and foster international protection of marine mammals and marine ecosystems. As with SPLASH, this effort reflects a broad vision that is essential for dealing with the conservation of highly migratory species. The Marine Mammal Commission commends the staff of the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary for these exceptional contributions.

At the Commission meeting, the Sanctuary staff also described their contributions to the conservation of Hawaiian monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands. Among other things, the staff (1) provided funding to the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources to hire a Sanctuary co-manager, who also oversees state involvement in monk seal recovery work, and a Kauai monk seal response coordinator, (2) sponsored public outreach and education programs and prepared and disseminated related materials, and (3) assisted in response efforts involving both routine monk seal haul-out events and emergency situations. Again, the Marine Mammal Commission commends the Sanctuary staff for helping to address various Hawaiian monk seal recovery needs.

Sanctuary staff noted that the Sanctuary's management plan is under review. In the past, the Commission has recommended including conservation of Hawaiian monk seals as part of the Sanctuary's mission. Staff noted that opposition to such a change may be strong among certain segments of Hawaii's resident population and that any formal change should be preceded by public outreach efforts. The Commission recognizes the potential for such opposition and concurs with the need to inform the public and build support before the formal process is initiated. Nonetheless, the Commission was pleased to hear that scoping meetings for the management plan review are expected to begin this spring. With that in mind, the Marine Mammal Commission recommends that the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary add conservation of Hawaiian monk seals within its boundaries to its designation document and management plan during the management plan review. In doing so, the Sanctuary should clarify that the purpose of adding monk seals to the Sanctuary's mission would be for assisting and carrying out non-regulatory tasks in the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan, particularly those related to public education and outreach, volunteer networks to promote monk seal recovery, monk seal rescue and emergency response situations, and related research activities.

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Once again, the Commission is very grateful to the staff of the Office of National Marine Sanctuaries for the excellent presentations at our meeting. I hope these recommendations and comments are helpful. Please contact me if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D
Executive Director

Cc: Daniel Basta, Ph.D.
Ms. Naomi McIntosh
Ms. Aulani Wilhelm