

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905
BETHESDA, MD 20814

25 January 2005

Dr. Samuel Pooley, Director
Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center
National Marine Fisheries Service
2570 Dole Street
Honolulu, HI 96822

Dear Dr. Pooley:

The Marine Mammal Commission and its Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals held their annual meeting 26-28 October 2004 in Hawaii to review issues related to the conservation of marine mammals, with a special focus on Hawaii and the Pacific islands area. We were pleased that you and several of your staff members from the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center (PIFSC) were able to participate in our discussions. You provided much valuable information and useful insight into the issues that we jointly face.

On the basis of the discussions during our meeting and other information reviewed by us, the Commission and Committee commend PIFSC on the many positive measures that it has taken to conserve living marine resources in the Pacific region. We recognize and commend the major efforts that PIFSC staff have made to work cooperatively with their resource management counterparts in other federal and state agencies. We also commend the extensive efforts that PIFSC staff have put into recovery of Hawaiian monk seals, and production of a revised version of the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan.

We offer the following recommendations on additional steps that we think PIFSC should take to further conservation of marine mammals and their ecosystems in the Pacific islands region.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that PIFSC and the Pacific Islands Regional Office (PIRO) develop a plan for research on and management of Pacific Islands Region cetaceans that will provide information on stock structure, abundance, and fishery-related mortality levels as required to assess fishery/marine mammal interactions under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA).**

The NMFS, particularly the Southwest Fisheries Science Center (SWFSC), has conducted and contracted for some research that has focused on cetacean distribution and abundance in the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) around the Hawaiian Islands. Little is known about the abundance, distribution, and stock structure of cetaceans in other parts of the vast Pacific islands region. The PIFSC is just now beginning to develop cetacean research expertise and capabilities. The PIRO has ongoing observer programs that have provided some information on levels of incidental take of protected species in domestic fisheries. Cetaceans in the EEZ may be part of larger Pacific populations, and those populations may experience takes in both domestic and international

fisheries. Also, there may be discrete subpopulations of some species within the EEZ that are subject to local anthropogenic impacts.

Developing an effective program for research and management of cetaceans in the Pacific Islands Region involves considerable logistical difficulties, as well as other challenges. To properly identify research and management goals, and strategies for achieving those goals, PIFSC and PIRO should work collaboratively with experienced cetacean biologists at the SWFSC and elsewhere within NMFS. In addition, PIFSC and PIRO will need to hire personnel with appropriate expertise, or develop that expertise through collaborative projects with the SWFSC or others. We note that some needs may be addressed, at least in part, through development of island-based research and management efforts in coordination with other agencies such as the U.S. Navy and Coast Guard. For example, the Navy may be able to provide logistical assistance for research in the Marianas or at Guam. Such opportunities for collaboration should be fully evaluated in the process of developing the overall plan. The Marine Mammal Commission would be happy to help with this difficult issue in any way it can.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that NMFS provide support and resources for development and coordination of stranding responses for all marine mammals within the main Hawaiian Islands, as well as other islands in the region.**

The logistical difficulties facing a stranding network in the Pacific islands region are daunting, where the shoreline is dispersed over thousands of miles of the central Pacific Ocean, and among many islands, atolls, and archipelagoes some of which are uninhabited or very sparsely populated. However, development of an effective stranding response network is feasible within the more populated and accessible main Hawaiian Islands. Personnel from PIRO, PIFSC, the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary, State of Hawaii agencies, and the volunteer Hawaiian Islands Stranding Response Group have all collaborated informally in responses to entanglements and strandings.

The Commission recognizes that the primary responsibility for developing and operating a stranding network rests with PIRO. However, PIFSC staff work extensively throughout the Pacific islands region, and they have the expertise needed to be valuable contributors to the stranding network. Also, information collected from stranded animals should help provide data needed by PIFSC to further describe the biology of marine mammals in this region. Therefore, the Commission urges PIFSC to work closely with PIRO and others in the further development and operation of the Pacific islands stranding network.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that NMFS continue existing levels of funding and support for ongoing research and recovery work on monk seals in the NWHI by PIFSC, and provide additional funding needed for studies of monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands.**

The Commission recognizes that PIFSC staff have conducted a well-designed monk seal research program for many years. Ongoing studies to assess monk seal colonies in the NWHI appear to be well organized and on track. Researchers have identified and provided direction for important recovery actions, including 1) the closure or restriction of certain fisheries potentially affecting monk seals, 2) the removal of debris that could entangle and kill seals, 3) the removal of selected individual sharks and aggressive adult male seals responsible for localized pup mortality, and 4) the development of methods to improve juvenile monk seal survival rates. Important studies to identify monk seal prey and to examine the potential effect of prey availability on monk seal population trends also appear to be progressing. The NMFS should continue to provide funding for these efforts, at least at existing levels.

Monk seals are hauling out and giving birth to pups with increasing frequency in the main Hawaiian Islands. To assess monk seal biology and management needs in this area, PIFSC should initiate a main Hawaiian Islands monk seal research program similar in scope to that undertaken in the NWHI. Research objectives should include the identification of monk seal foraging areas, description of movement and site-fidelity patterns, and collection of samples to identify prey preferences. The NMFS should provide PIFSC with additional funding to design and conduct the necessary studies, many of which are described in the report from the October 2002 Workshop on the Management of Monk Seals on Beaches in the Main Hawaiian Islands sponsored by the Commission, NMFS, and the State of Hawaii, and the soon-to-be-released revision of the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that personnel from PIFSC collaborate with the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to increase efforts to assess the abundance, behavior, and movements of Galapagos sharks in the NWHI, particularly at French Frigate Shoals.**

Both Galapagos and tiger sharks are predators of monk seals in the NWHI. Although this predation may largely be a natural feature of the ecosystem, such predation can have a major impact on the prospects for recovery of endangered monk seals. In recent years, PIFSC has worked with the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge to design and permit an experimental program allowing limited removal of Galapagos sharks at French Frigate Shoals, where shark predation was known to be high and the monk seal population was declining. The removal of a small number of sharks by PIFSC staff appears to have had a major and positive impact on monk seal pup survival at that site, but there is now evidence that shark predation may be a problem in other parts of the NWHI. The Commission understands that the intentional removal of important ecosystem components like sharks should be done very carefully. Therefore we are encouraging PIFSC to work with the Refuge to design and conduct a continuation of the shark removal program that can be conducted as a research project with careful attention to follow-up monitoring and observation.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that PIFSC, PIRO, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and State of Hawaii agencies cooperate to address the growing problem of loss of suitable haulout and pupping habitat for monk seals in the NWHI.**

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In the NWHI, monk seals rest, give birth, and care for their young on many reefs and islands, some of which are very small and barely above sea level. At the Commission's annual meeting, monk seal researchers pointed out that many of these islands are experiencing considerable erosion, particularly of the sandy beaches preferred by seals. In at least one case an area that had previously been heavily used for pupping has virtually disappeared. Maintaining suitable habitat for monk seals may be critically important for recovery of the species. The Commission recognizes that these habitats are extremely vulnerable to erosion from wave action and potential rises in sea level, and finding ways to prevent or mitigate such losses may be difficult. Nonetheless, we are encouraging all involved agencies to give attention to this issue, and to consider ways to protect, and if possible restore and enhance, island habitats used by monk seals in the NWHI.

- **The Marine Mammal Commission recommends that PIFSC conduct research on the effectiveness of management actions taken to mitigate problems caused by swim-with-the-wild-dolphin operations, and to evaluate potential cumulative effects of human activities on spinner dolphins.**

Some research has been conducted to identify areas in Hawaii used most frequently by resting spinner dolphins. Data derived from those studies can and should be used to help identify areas appropriate for protective measures. When protective measures are implemented, additional research should be conducted to measure the effectiveness of management actions adopted, and to try to understand the possible cumulative impacts that human activities may be having on dolphins. The PIFSC should take a lead role in this research, collaborating as appropriate with dolphin experts in NMFS and elsewhere.

We hope that these recommendations and comments are helpful to you. Additional specific recommendations relating to these and other topics discussed at our annual meeting are being communicated directly to appropriate administrators and directors. Copies of those letters are enclosed for your information. I would like to contact your office to arrange a time in the near future when we can discuss these recommendations.

Sincerely,



David Cottingham
Executive Director

Enclosures