

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

28 February 2003

Mr. Peter T. Young
Chair
Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources
1151 Punchbowl Street, Rm 130
Honolulu, HI 96813

Dear Mr. Young:

The Marine Mammal Commission, an independent agency of the Federal Government, recently learned that the Hawaii State Legislature is considering identical bills in the House and the Senate (SB 1497 and HB 1407) to develop a network of marine reserves in state waters around the main Hawaiian Islands. As we understand it, the bills would create a process to identify and establish marine reserves covering a combined total of 20 percent of the marine area under state jurisdiction around each of the main Hawaiian Islands. Within those reserves, the taking of any marine species for recreational or commercial purposes would be prohibited or limited. The designated reserves would thus serve to protect the integrity of coastal marine ecosystems, help maintain viable populations of marine life inhabiting Hawaii's coastal waters, and support stocks of commercially and recreationally important marine species that could naturally replenish stocks of those species exploited in areas outside the marine reserve system.

Unfortunately, more often than not traditional fishery management practices have been unable to prevent overexploitation of the fish and shellfish stocks they have sought to conserve. Among other things, this has led to the severe depletion of valuable target species (and also some non-target species), to reduced catch levels and lost economic opportunities by local fishing communities, and to significant alterations of coastal ecosystems and marine food chains on which most marine species, including marine mammals, depend. In Hawaii, this is of particular concern for the highly endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Despite constant efforts to improve and refine fishery management, the depleted status of a large proportion of managed fish stocks stands as stark evidence of the current limitations of fishery management systems. Recognizing the importance of maintaining stocks of exploited species, resource managers in many countries have recently begun to consider and designate networks of marine reserves, similar to the one contemplated in the proposed legislation, to supplement traditional fishery management measures.

Evidence to document the effectiveness of marine reserve networks for enhancing

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fish stocks outside of established reserves is presently limited because most of these efforts are still too new or because well-developed research programs to assess their effectiveness have been difficult to design and implement. In some areas where no take reserves have been created (e.g., the Florida Keys), fish populations appear to be increasing and coral reef ecosystems appear to be recovering slowly.

The number of Hawaiian monk seals has been increasing in the main Hawaiian Islands in recent years. The establishment of marine reserves in areas where they occur most frequently could help promote their recovery by improving the quality of their habitat and the protection of their prey. The Marine Mammal Commission therefore supports efforts to establish marine reserves to supplement traditional fishery management actions and improve the protection of the marine habitats on which monk seals, as well as other species, depend. Because of Hawaii's isolation and limited coastal habitats, application of the marine reserve concept to Hawaii's state waters is particularly important. As a general matter, setting aside state waters within in a reserve network would be a significant step to conserve the state's living marine resources. The optimal percentage of state waters to include in network will likely vary depend on a number of factors, including the size, location, and types of areas to be established, the extent to which taking is limited within the various areas, and the specific goals of the network. While 20 percent of state waters around each of the islands may be a reasonable goal for an isolated archipelago such as the Hawaiian Islands, a range of percentages above and below this figure might be a more appropriate goal given current the uncertainties about the envisioned network.

The Marine Mammal Commission supports and encourages efforts by Hawaii's state government to consider and refine the proposed approach reflected in the referenced bills. We recognize that implementing a network of highly protected areas could cause concern and economic hardship for some segments of Hawaii's population. However, the potential advantages of securing a healthier, more productive coastal ecosystem for future generations would, in our view, significantly outweigh near-term economic hardships and produce lasting benefits for all Hawaiian residents.

I hope these comments are helpful. If you have questions, please call.

Sincerely,



David Cottingham
Executive Director

cc Mr. William Divick