

MMC Annual Meeting 2019

Session Summary - Monk Seal Session

The Hawaiian monk seal is the most endangered pinniped in U.S. waters and one of the most endangered pinnipeds worldwide. Most Hawaiian monk seals live in the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) where their numbers declined a great deal after the late 1950s. Modest but encouraging increases in abundance have been documented in the NWHI from 2013 to the present. Since the 1990s, seal abundance in the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) has increased significantly and now represents 20 percent of the species' total population size. However, the monk seal still faces numerous threats to its continued recovery in both portions of its range.

The session began with Jason Baker and Angela Amlin reviewing the latest information on population status, threats and mitigation efforts. Michelle Barbieri, Josh Atwood, Claire Simeone, and Amanda Boyd went on to describe some of the specific threats monk seals face. Those included health threats—with a focus on toxoplasmosis—rehabilitation efforts at Ke Kai Ola, and infrastructure challenges (including those associated with deploying and recovering field camp personnel in the NWHI) and recent terrestrial habitat loss at French Frigate Shoals. Michelle Barbieri then presented a recently completed analysis regarding monk seal causes of death in the MHI, on behalf of Bert Harting the lead author. Finally, Suzanne Case provided perspective from the state of Hawai'i on fisheries interactions and monk seals.

During the panel discussion, participants delved into the challenges posed by toxoplasmosis and what could be done to mitigate that threat. The panel participants also shared their thoughts and responded to questions regarding fisheries interactions and ways to better engage with fishermen and local communities.