

# *Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument*

## **Endangered Species - The Hawaiian Monk Seal**

### **Management Issue**

The Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*) is in crisis, with current populations declining at a rate of 5% per year. This decline has lasted twenty years and only about 1200 monk seals remain. Information is needed to guide management efforts to recover this vulnerable species.

### **Description**

The endemic Hawaiian monk seal, the most endangered marine mammal in the United States, is the only seal species dependent upon coral reefs for its existence. For the past two decades, a concerted effort has been made to save the Hawaiian monk seal. The US Government, the State of Hawai‘i, nongovernment organizations, private sector entities and countless individuals in local communities across Hawai‘i have worked to recover the species. However, these efforts have not been sufficient to prevent a continued decline in the species. In 2007, a Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan was developed, which described several information needs that would aid

management of this species. These include investigating food limitations and continuing population monitoring and research.



*Endangered monk seal and Pearl and Hermes atoll. Credit: James Watt*

### **Questions and Information Needs**

- 1) Are food limitations contributing to decreased health of Hawaiian monk seals?
- 2) What is the status of populations at each atoll?
- 3) How effective are recovery efforts?
- 4) To what degree is shark predation limiting recovery of Hawaiian monk seals?
- 5) Where are the primary feeding grounds for Hawaiian monk seals?
- 6) What are the factors preventing recovery of the Hawaiian monk seal?

### **Scientific Approach and Actions**

- Support marine debris removal activities to promote recovery
- Conduct studies to document extent and causes of habitat loss
- Conduct population monitoring activities
- Monitor food sources to determine if food is limiting recovery
- Identify monk seal foraging habitat
- Analyze foraging behavior of monk seals
- Model erosion of islands to determine anticipated habitat loss
- Support shark tagging projects to determine extent of predation

### **Potential Key Partners and Information Sources**

NOAA/NMFS, PIFSC, Protected Species Division; State of Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources; US Fish and Wildlife Service; Native Hawaiian Cultural Practitioners; Hawai‘i Institute of Marine Biology

*Updated: September 2014*

*For More Information -- <http://www.sanctuaries.noaa.gov/science/assessment>*

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### **Management Support Products**

- Maps delineating primary foraging grounds
- Results of shark tagging study
- Population information at each island/atoll in the NWHI

### **Planned Use of Products and Actions**

Although endangered and threatened species are not the direct responsibility of the Monument, coordination with agencies responsible for their welfare and recovery is necessary to ensure that activities taking place in the PMNM, and Monument management, are effective in protecting and enhancing populations of those species. To support efforts to enhance protected species in the NWHI, the Monument has identified several strategies:

- Coordinate with partners on protected species needs by communicating regularly with jurisdictional agencies on protected species issues and assisting in the development and implementation of a protected species threat reduction assessment for the NWHI.
- Support and facilitate research on protected species by identifying research needs and supporting research to enhance populations of protected species and incorporating new data on candidate and protected species into the NWHI biogeographic assessment database.
- Develop standardized protocols to respond to emergency situations such as ship groundings, oil spills and disease outbreaks.
- Evaluate the loss of monk seal habitat due to erosion, climate change, sea-level rise and other factors, and evaluate the feasibility of restoring monk seal habitats.
- Reduce potential impacts of human interactions on monk seals by evaluating activities before issuing permits and by informing all NWHI users of impacts of disturbing monk seals.
- Support outreach and education on Hawaiian monk seals, so that the public and interest groups understand the critical status of this species and the urgency of actions to prevent extinction.



*Young monk seal resting on the beach. The majority of the monk seal pupping and resting beaches are just above sea level and at severe risk due to predicted sea level rise. Photo credit: James Watt*

### **Program References**

#### PMNM Management Plan

- Action Plan 3.2.1 Threatened and Endangered Species
  - o Strategy TES-1: Support activities that advance recovery of the Hawaiian monk seal for the life of the plan.
- *Links to other Action Plans:*
  - o 3.1.1 - Marine Conservation Science
  - o 3.2.3 - Habitat Management and Conservation
  - o 3.3.1 - Marine Debris
  - o 3.4.1- Permitting Action Plan
  - o 3.5.1 - Agency Coordination
  - o 3.6.3 - Coordinated Field Operations

#### PMNM Condition Report

- Issue of Hawaiian Monk Seal status in response to Questions 5, 12 and 13.

#### Other Documents

- Monument Goals 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 7

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