

LEAVING THE ISLANDS
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On Sunday, April 11, 1999, Hawai'i lost another 10 residents to the mainland due to the "high cost of living". The usual gathering of friends and well wishers were there to see them off. Some had tears in their eyes, along with the somber look of having to bid farewell to yet some more casualties of life here in Hawai'i. The departees were not relatives of mine. I didn't even know their names or have a chance to know them. Yet I, too, was compelled to see them off and bid them farewell.

Arriving at the airline terminal at 5:00 AM, I expected to already see them in their crates ready to be loaded into the cargo bins of the airplane. However, because they had not yet arrived at the airport, I had a chance to prepare myself and observe the action. Still, when they did arrive, I was not quite prepared for the emotion of the scene. By now you are probably wondering who these traveler's were and why they would be in crates.

You see, the 10 residents, bound for San Antonio, Texas, were blind monk seals being shipped to Sea World for "long term care and overall husbandry". They were going to Texas because "they are too expensive to keep in Hawai'i. It is now costing the Federal Government over \$250,000 a year to keep them in captivity". As usual, the questions what, when, where, why and how came up:

What happened? In April, 1998, EnviroWatch, Inc. began following rumors that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) was housing 12 blind monk seals at Sea Life Park that they

didn't want the public to know about because it was an embarrassment to the Agency. After being collected from French Frigate Shoals, in poor health and nearly starved to death, they were taken to Sea Life Park for rehabilitation where they only got worse.

When and where did they go blind? Dr. G. "Bud" Antonelis, PhD, the Chief Protected Species Investigator for the NMFS told EnviroWatch that in 1989 NMFS partnered with Sea Life Park, Hawai'i, in a collaborative effort to rehabilitate undersized monk seal pups with a low probability of survival. After rehabilitation they would be released into the wild to support population growth.

In May and June, 1995, 12 female monk seal pups, 5-6 months old, were collected from French Frigate Shoals, temporarily stored at Tern Island, then brought to Sea Life Park. The seals developed an eye condition and became blind approximately 15 months later. Subsequently they were transferred to the NMFS Kewalo Research Facility where two died. According to NMFS, "the cause of death was related to a bacterial infection unrelated to the eye condition."

Why are the monk seals blind? The cause of the blindness has not been determined and has not been detected in other marine mammal species. The 12 monk seals taken from French Frigate Shoals represent approximately one percent of the total remaining population.

In late September, 1998, EnviroWatch learned that the monk seals were being retained at NOAA's lab at Kewalo Basin. We also learned that they were going to be shipped to San Antonio, Texas. By contacting KGMB News and getting them involved, we were able to bring this matter to the public's attention. Then we learned that large numbers of other monk seal pups were dying. In one case 50 or more pups died or disappeared from Laysan Island.

Why are they dying? In a letter dated November 30, 1994, Mr. John R. Twiss, Jr. of the Marine Mammal Commission, advised Mr. Rolland A. Schmitt, Assistant Administrator for Fisheries, NMFS, that "the Marine Mammal Commission is gravely concerned about continuing declines in the Hawaiian Monk Seal population. Now numbering about 1,200 animals, it has declined 20% over the last five years and about 35% since 1985."

"The monk seal colony at French Frigate Shoals, the species' largest breeding colony, has declined by approximately 45% in the last five years, apparently due to reduced prey availability." "Although the relative importance of prey species in the monk seal diet is uncertain, lobsters, which are harvested commercially at French Frigate Shoals, may be an important prey for young animals not experienced in catching more mobile species."

How can this be happening? Since 1994 at least ten letters were written by the Marine Mammal Commission to the NMFS relating to the recommendation to close lobster fishing around French Frigate Shoals:

NMFS replied as follows:

Oct 5, 1995 - "I do not believe that we have the necessary information at this time to take the

management measure that you have recommended..."

Apr 30, 1996 - "... regulatory action, such as a closure of the French Frigate Shoals fishing area may be considered based on information contained in the Biological Opinion".

Sept 5, 1997 - "... the fishery would not occur at a level that was detrimental to the monk seals".

Apr 1, 1998 - "In time, a better understanding of the relationship between monk seals and their food sources will be available."

Aug 24, 1998 - "Additional time is necessary to adequately address your recommendation to prohibit lobster fishing at French Frigate Shoals..."

Blind leading the Blind



After years of bureaucratic stalling it appears that NMFS and the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (WPRFMC) are turning a blind eye to the welfare of the monk seals. In a March 9, 1999, letter to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, it appears Kitty Simonds, Executive Director of WPRFMC, made an attempt to shirk any responsibility her agency holds in the management of the monk seals by shifting the burden to the US Fish and Wildlife Service. In the letter she states: "Apparently there is great concern over the poor survival of seal juveniles over the past decade, many of which appear to be emaciated. This would suggest problems with forage availability, and the MMC feels that this is exacerbated by commercial harvests of lobsters".

Simond went on to state that there has been "little to no fishing activity at French Frigate Shoals over the past decade so the problem is unlikely to be the fault of the fishery".

However, after expressing concern that animal populations at FFS are being exposed to toxins, based on incidental observation of albatross behavior, she states that "papers on marine mammals such as seals and dolphins show that aquatic mammals become more vulnerable to viral infection when exposed to toxins such as DDT and PCB's." She then requests information in order to "advise fishermen that there may be risks associated with harvested lobsters at FFS, as well as the attendant problems with protected species".

EnviroWatch wrote Simonds requesting information on the actions her agency has taken to advise the public of the possibility that lobster taken from French Frigate Shoals are a danger to

public health due to their contamination with the insecticide DDT and the family of Polychlorinated biphenyls or PCB's. She did not comment.

The MMC has also advised the WPRFMC that commercial fishing in monk seal habitat may also increase the risk of ciguatera poisoning to the seals. They stated that non-target species, such as Kahala, known to bio-accumulate ciguatoxins, are routinely discarded by bottom fishermen. Observers aboard the bottom fishing vessels have documented this.

With Simonds at the helm, the WPRFMC is finding itself in a number of questionable relationships and conflicts. Financial disclosure statements filed by Mr. James Cook, Chairman of WPRFMC, and other documents received from NMFS, indicate that Cook owns nine limited entry permits for long lining and lobsters. Most recently he opposed the ban on shark finning, a practice his vessels actively participate in.

During testimony at a House Committee hearing for HB1706 on shark finning, Edwin Cross, a shark fisherman who arrived here in late 1998, told the committee that he had been given permission by Kitty Simonds and members of WPRFMC to fish in Hawaii's waters using longline gear. EnviroWatch followed up on Cross' claims and found that Cross had in fact contacted Mr. James Cook and discussed the possibilities of shark fishing in Hawaii. We recovered an Application for Experimental Fishing Permit submitted to the WPRFMC by Mr. Edwin Cross. In the application Cross stated "to fish with bottom long line in the northwest Hawaiian Islands specifically to catch, identify and quantify shark in that area. To be conducted at the request and direction of the Western Pacific Regional Council. Sharks will be the target species".

Though Cross stated he was invited and encouraged by the WPRFMC to do so, he wasn't allowed to fish in waters under federal jurisdiction. He was only allowed to fish in state waters and, indeed, that is exactly what he did. In the application Cross also stated "in 47 days fishing the main Hawaiian Islands, the following is the total bycatch: 12 Ulua, half of which were alive and released, 0 birds, 0 mammals and 0 turtles. Incidental bottom fish which are recovered alive will be returned". To make a long story short, the WPRFMC doesn't issue permits, so why were they in the loop? According to Dr. Charles Karnella, Area Director, National Marine Fisheries Service - the agency that does issues permits - they only received the application after EnviroWatch made inquiries.

About now you are probably figuring it can't get much worse. Unfortunately it does. The U.S. Coast Guard told EnviroWatch that in early March of this year the longline fishing vessel, NORTHERN VENTURE, was cited for fishing in a closed area due north of Honolulu. This vessel is registered to Vessel Management, in which James Cook, per his annual Financial Interest Disclosure Statement owns a 50% interest.

At this rate I expect that I will be showing up at the airport to bid farewell to other residents who were once commercial and recreational fishermen but who, like the monk seal, can't afford to live here anymore. The fishermen are unable to make a living because WPRFMC and NMFS are pulling the wool over their eyes.

The good news, the monk seals have a new home where they can be observed and taken care. The bad news, lobster fishing is not the only commercial fishing activity that is managed by the WPRFMC.



A rainbow to say good bye

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