




Vol. 5 (2): November 2002

Hawaiian News

Download this page 

Scientists continue to target shark cull

Scientists opposed to the projected cull of Galapagos sharks at the Hawaiian monk seal breeding site at French Frigate Shoals have continued to broadcast their objections to the scheme, amid signs that NMFS may be willing to address at least some of their concerns [see [Killing sharks at French Frigate Shoals is unacceptable](#), 5 (1): May 2002].

In a second open letter summarizing perceived deficiencies in the NMFS proposal, Ian L. Jones – Associate Chair of the Atlantic Cooperative Wildlife Ecology Research Network and a faculty member of the Memorial University of Newfoundland – has informed NMFS that, in his view, the cull is "scientifically unsupportable and outrageous".

Detailing his objections, Jones challenges the basis upon which NMFS has portrayed the cull in its public notice as a research project, even though one of its stated aims is "to reduce monk seal pre-weaned pup mortality by Galapagos sharks..."

"If this is the primary goal of the project," Jones contends, "then it is not a research project – it is a management action. The goal of research is to gather scientific data regarding a question... The goal of endangered species management is to take action once the action has been scientifically justified."

If NMFS were purely interested in research, he continues, it "could conduct research on pup mortality and on the behaviour of Galapagos Sharks without killing any sharks." Jones is of the opinion that the cull is more likely to hamper rather than aid research efforts, in part because of the disturbance it would generate.

Jones also takes issue with the public notice's contention that "Recent studies have shown that shark predation can be a significant contributing factor to early Hawaiian monk seal pup mortality at Trig Island, French Frigate Shoals."

In his letter to NMFS, he writes: "This vague statement is your only basis for conducting your proposed shark cull, but is [an] entirely inadequate scientific justification for such an activity. We all agree that Galapagos Sharks take a few pups; this is in no way a scientific justification for a cull. What quantitative evidence is there that such mortality is 'significant' to the Monk Seal population? The clear picture regarding the Hawaiian Monk Seal population at FFS, based on published science, is that the population decline is due to failure of juvenile recruitment due to malnutrition, resulting from a combination of poor oceanographic conditions and likely overfishing [see [Judge issues ruling in "monk seal starvation" case](#), TMG 4(1): May 2001].

Jones also challenges the public notice's contention that "The initial removal of up to 15 sharks is estimated to represent about 2% of the total population size of Galapagos sharks at French Frigate Shoals and is not expected to compromise the viability of the shark population based on shark population models and the best available scientific information."

In his letter to NMFS, Jones argues that scientific knowledge of the Galapagos Shark population at FFS is so uncertain that it "makes this statement highly dubious."

He also questions whether NMFS models have adequately "accounted for the cumulative impact of a removal of 15 sharks, on top of the unquantified (but possibly very large) mortality of Galapagos Sharks in a recent fin fishery near FFS in which hundreds of sharks were removed."

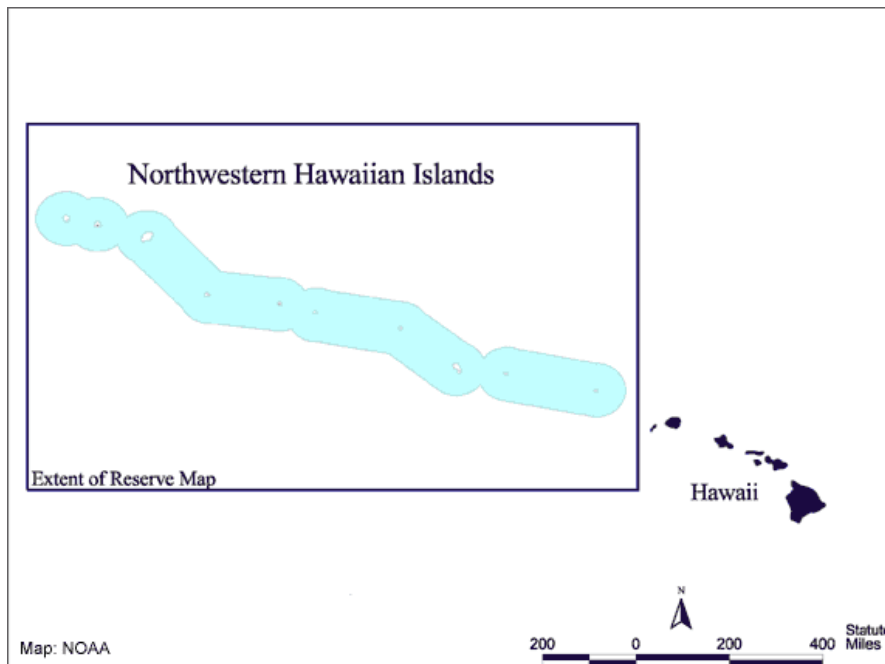
Suggesting a possible link between sharks, monk seals and dwindling food resources at FFS, he writes: "a number of lines of evidence point to a change in marine productivity that has reduced the number and density of reef fish around the atoll, and reduced recruitment of juvenile Monk Seals. These data suggest that the Galapagos Shark population, as an apex predator in this same system, would be under similar extreme food stress, which raises concern about the viability of the Galapagos Shark population even in the absence of your proposed cull."

An invitation to NMFS to comment on the Galapagos Shark issue unfortunately elicited no response.

'Trojan Horse' may threaten NWHI Reserve

Environmental campaigners in Hawaii and on the US mainland have continued to warn of government efforts to undermine the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, established by outgoing President Bill Clinton in December 2000 [see [Bush accused of undermining Ecosystem Reserve](#), TMG 5(1): May 2002, [Under review](#), TMG 4(2): November 2001, ["Living rainbow" may benefit monk seals](#), TMG 4(1): May 2001].

Incorporating the reefs, atolls and islands of the Leeward Chain, the Reserve stretches over 1,930 km (1,200 miles) into the Pacific northwest, and is home to some 7000 species of coral, seabirds like the Laysan albatross, the threatened green turtle and the endangered leatherback and hawksbill turtles. It is also the principal habitat of the Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*), which is still thought to be declining by about 5% a year, despite conservation efforts.



[click here for more detailed map](#)

Native Hawaiians, who are among the Reserve's most ardent supporters, also believe that the islands are a link to their Polynesian ancestry and thus hold profound cultural and spiritual significance.

Earlier this year, abiding by the instructions of the U.S. Congress, the federal government proposed the creation of an NWHI Sanctuary whose purpose, as originally defined under the Executive Order, was to "complement or supplement" existing Reserve protections. In reality, say defenders of the Reserve, a barrage of powerful political and economic forces were attempting to undermine them.

"There appears to be a move to utilize the Sanctuary as a 'Trojan horse' which may act to undo NWHI Reserve protections," declared Dr. Stephanie Fried, Senior Scientist at Environment Defense, on 15 May 2002.

Appealing for a groundswell of public support to defend the Reserve, Environmental Defense warned that: "NWHI are threatened on several fronts. In Congress, the fishing industry, backed by fishery management councils, has introduced the Right to Fish Act, which would undermine protections in the NWHI and gut the Sanctuary Act. Other concerns include efforts to open commercial aquarium fish collection in the NWHI, access by mega-cruise ships, dubious 'research' activities, and attempts by the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council to begin coral harvesting."

Sanctuary protections, according to Environment Defense, should incorporate not only those measures embodied in the NWHI Executive Orders, but also the following additional provisions:

- Research, educational, scientific, commercial and recreational activities should be allowed only if they do not harm the ecosystem, are independently monitored, and meet conservation goals as determined by a permit review committee consisting of ecologists who have worked in the NWHI, conservation representatives, and Native Hawaiian representatives.
- All State waters in the NWHI should be incorporated into the NWHI Sanctuary at strict levels of protection, mirroring protections in federal waters.

- A Kapu Zone should be established, running the length of the Sanctuary, closed to commercial activity with the exception of fishers grandfathered under the NWHI Executive Orders.
- Native Hawaiian cultural, religious and subsistence access must be guaranteed.
- Strong enforcement of Reserve and Sanctuary rules is needed. Without adequate enforcement, protection efforts will fail.
- Twenty-four hour automatic Vessel Monitoring Systems must be required on all boats accessing the NWHI Reserve/Sanctuary, independent dock-side inspection of returning vessels, and significant penalties for Sanctuary violations.
- Clear steps must be taken to ensure that the Sanctuary designation process itself, does not lead to increased human impact on fragile ecosystem as result of Reserve/Sanctuary designation.
- Military activities in the NWHI should be limited to the clean-up and clearing of military structures, dumpsites, toxins, and debris.
- "Eco-tourism" activities should be limited to Midway.
- Cruise ship access to the fragile NWHI Reserve and Sanctuary should be prohibited.

Environment Defense listed the following "substantial threats" that should be prohibited within the NWHI Reserve and the proposed NWHI Sanctuary:

- Lobster Fishing.
- Coral Harvesting.
- New fisheries and transfer of fishing permits.
- Aquarium fish collecting.
- Bio-prospecting.
- Dredging or construction.
- Dumping (vessel sewage, ballast water, CO₂, etc.).
- Ocean mining or exploration.
- Research that does not follow the Executive Order mandate of conservation.

By September, Environment Defense and its partner in action, KAHEA, were reporting that the outpouring of public support for the Reserve was having a significant impact. Letters, faxes, emails and testimony at government hearings had, they said:

- "Helped convince the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) to cancel two dangerous plans to open up 'precious coral' and 'coral reef ecosystem' fisheries in the NWHI.
- Forced the State of Hawai'i to withdraw its dangerous 'Fishery Management Area' plan for State waters in the NWHI and come up with a plan for a NWHI Refuge in State waters.
- Sent the National Ocean Service back to the drawing board with their weak and unacceptable NWHI Reserve Operations Plan."

In letters dispatched to Robert P. Smith, the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve Coordinator, the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission also voiced its objections to the draft Reserve Operations Plan [see Further Information, below]. Aside from challenging the draft's fatuous contention that the "size of the monk seal population has remained essentially unchanged since 1993", the Commission also called upon the National Ocean Service to honour the Executive Order's founding principles, notably its expressed aim of ensuring the long-term protection of the coral reef ecosystem, and of applying management techniques based on sound science and the 'precautionary principle' (i.e. giving nature the benefit of the doubt, rather than economic interests).

Meanwhile, public protests in Hawaii were also taking aim at draft regulations to be applied within state waters of the NWHI reserve.

Writing to The Monachus Guardian, KAHEA's Executive Director, Cha Smith, reported that "The first draft regulations were soundly rejected by record numbers of locals who consistently call for strong protections, especially in the most vulnerable NWHI waters, where the state has jurisdiction."

The State's second version, drawn up by the Department of Land and Natural Resources (Aquatics Division), appeared in August for public comment and review. According to KAHEA, the revised text represents a significant improvement over the much-maligned first draft, proposing regulations that "provide strong protection measures for the fragile coral reef ecosystem and reflect most of the concerns outlined in the large number of public comments."

The possible incorporation of state waters into the proposed federal NWHI Sanctuary is likely to take several years, according to KAHEA.

Smith also hailed a landmark fisheries decision in June 2002, when NMFS, citing a need to uphold the Executive Order, "stripped the NWHI out of Western Pacific Fishery Management Council's dubious Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan." Following WESPAC'S vigorous lobbying to re-open the NWHI lobster fishery, the decision, said Smith, was a "sound win for us and the seals."

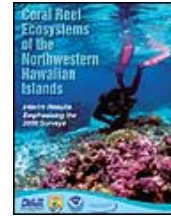
Despite several crucial victories in the fight for the Reserve, both KAHEA and Environmental Defense warn that "the

NWHI are still under relentless attack" and public pressure is still urgently required to ensure that the Reserve is established as originally intended.

For further information:

In the [Monachus Library](#):

Maragos, J. and D. Gulko (eds.). 2002. Coral Reef Ecosystems of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands: Interim Results Emphasizing the 2000 Surveys. U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, Honolulu, Hawaii: 1-46.



KAHEA. 2002. Talking points. Help protect the NWHI: 1-3.

KAHEA. 2002b. Press Release. Board of Land and Natural Resources *Approves* Public Comment Period for Newly revised Regulations for State Waters in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. August 23, 2002.

NMFS. 2002. Fishery management plan for coral reef ecosystems of the western Pacific region. Record of Decision. 14 June 2002: 1-8.

Marine Mammal Commission. 2002b. Letter to Robert P. Smith, Reserve Coordinator, NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, 17 May 2002.

Marine Mammal Commission. 2002c. Letter to Robert P. Smith, Reserve Coordinator, NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, 23 May 2002.

On the web:

Environmental Defense: [Protecting the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.](#)

KAHEA: [Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in the News.](#)

Official government website: [NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve.](#)

Midway births

In August, the website of the [Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge](#) reported the following monk seal pupping news of the season:

"The 2002 monk seal pupping season is nearly finished, and it has been another productive year. Through mid-July 2002, 13 pups were born on Spit and Eastern Islands, nearly equaling the record of 14 pups that were born in 2000. There are still a couple of adult females that have a small chance of having a pup before the end of the main breeding season.

Sharks continue to pose a threat to the population. National Marine Fisheries Service biologists studying the population at Midway have confirmed at least four seals with major shark bites in 2002, with one confirmed mortality. The monk seal population is estimated at 50-65 animals."



Mother and pup on Eastern Island



Earlier this year, the site also reported a parting of the ways between the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and Midway Phoenix Corporation, the commercial contractor responsible for keeping the Atoll's infrastructure running, including its airport and visitor programme.

"On March 6, the Fish and Wildlife Service and Midway Phoenix Corporation jointly agreed to terminate their cooperative agreement regarding Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge," read the announcement, adding that Midway's visitor programme had to be temporarily closed as a result.

While the site did not elaborate, it is known that tensions flared on a number of occasions as conservation and commercial interests clashed over their respective visions of the Atoll's future [see [The Old Woman Who Swallowed the Fly](#), TMG 2 (1): May 1999; [Midway's Monk Seals](#), TMG 1 (2): December 1998].

[Previous](#) [Contents](#) [Home](#) [Next](#)

Copyright © 2002 The Monachus Guardian. All Rights Reserved

