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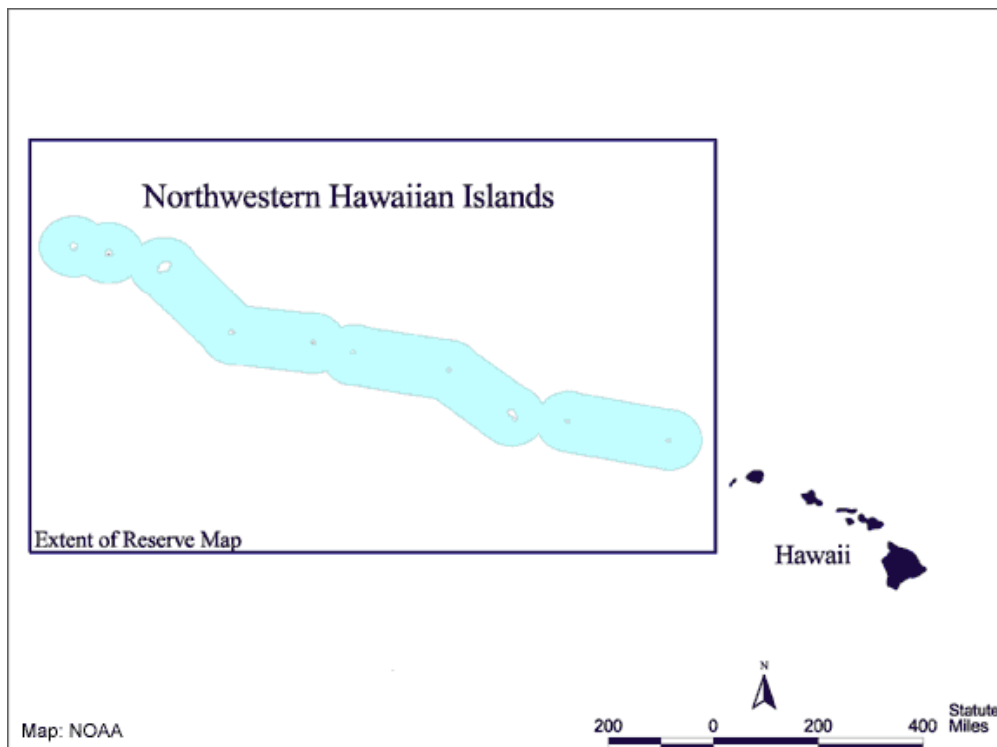
Marine Mammal Commission reviews recovery plan

The Marine Mammal Commission's Annual Report to Congress for 2002 has recently been published. Following established practice, and by courtesy of the Commission, we are making the relevant chapter available for download from the [Monachus Library](#) [for citation, see below]. Below, we present a summary of the Report's main findings:

In April 2002, the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission (MMC) convened a review panel to reexamine Hawaiian monk seal recovery needs. Members included marine mammal scientists and managers with experience in Hawaiian monk seal conservation. The panel provided a summary of its findings and recommendations to the Commission in August 2002; these were subsequently transmitted to relevant government agencies, including the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), National Ocean Service, Fish and Wildlife Service, Coast Guard and Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources.

Population assessment

The Honolulu Laboratory of NMFS is responsible for data collection and also various management actions among the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. These range from beach counts to disentangling seals from marine debris. The review panel, notes the MMC, "was impressed by the laboratory's field program. Funding support for the program [currently \$1.2 million of its \$2 million 2002 monk seal budget] has doubled since the Commission's 1995 program review, the fieldwork is well organized, and the data collected on this species over the past years now constitute perhaps the best long-term dataset for any seal species worldwide." In order to optimize its fieldwork, however, the panel recommended that field work concentrate on determining mortality factors at each of the six breeding colonies under regular study. The panel, in particular, highlighted Lisianski and Laysan Islands "where the colonies have not been increasing and recently may have begun a downward trend."



Blue defines the approximate Reserve boundaries ([click here for more detailed map](#))

At the end of 1992, notes the MMC, NMFS preliminary research indicated that “for the second year in a row, juvenile survival rates were low at all breeding sites. In the past, low juvenile survival had been a problem principally at Laysan and Lisianski Islands, and particularly at French Frigate Shoals.” At the same time, however, the total number of births in the NWHI had marginally increased, from 178 in 2001 to 196 in 2002. Paradoxically, mean beach counts had declined for the second year in a row at the westernmost colonies (Kure, Midway, Pearl and Hermes Reef), reversing recent increases.

Fisheries interactions

Noting that Hawaiian monk seals feed on a variety of prey, including small reef fish, octopuses, lobsters and other crustaceans, the MMC draws attention once again to the suspicion that a reduction in prey availability driven by overfishing, may be responsible for a decline in monk seal numbers at certain colonies, notably French Frigate Shoals [TMGs, *passim*]. Over-exploitation of lobsters and reef fish at FFS was directly implicated in the starvation of pups and juvenile seals in a Federal court case in 2000, when public interest law firm Earthjustice successfully sued NMFS for failing to protect seals from fisheries impacts [see [Judge issues ruling in “monk seal starvation” case](#), TMG 4(1) May 2001]. NMFS subsequently closed the lobster fishery for the 2000 season and, following the designation of the NWHI as a Reserve by President Clinton in December of the same year [[“Living rainbow” may benefit monk seals](#), TMG 4(1): May 2001; [Under review](#), TMG 4(2): November 2001], did not allow a resumption.

The MMC notes, however, that the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Council has questioned the legality of fisheries-related aspects of President Clinton’s Executive Order creating the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, and observes that NMFS has initiated a study to “resolve questions about the status of the region’s lobster stocks.”

The MMC notes that it has “written more than a dozen letters between 1991 and 1999 to the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council recommending precautionary management measures to protect monk seals from the effects of lobster fishing.”

National Marine Sanctuary

President Clinton’s Executive Order directed that steps be undertaken to designate the NWHI Coral reef Ecosystem Reserve as a national marine sanctuary, a responsibility that subsequently fell to the National Ocean Service [see [‘Trojan Horse’ may threaten NWHI Reserve](#), 5 (2): November 2002]. The NOS began a canvassing process early in 2000 to solicit public comment and expert advice on the creation and management of the sanctuary. The MMC, citing its own attempts over the previous decade to have the precautionary principle applied to human activities within the NWHI, also seized the opportunity of reminding the NOS that the founding Executive Order itself directs that “the Reserve shall be managed using available science and applying a precautionary approach with resource protection favored when there is a lack of information regarding any activity, to the extent not contrary to law.” Suspicions have been voiced from many quarters that the Bush administration was engaged in a back-door effort to water down the protection promised by the Executive Order during the conversion process from Reserve to Marine Sanctuary.

In reviewing the NOS draft Reserve Operations Plan, the MMC notes that the draft “did not clearly or prominently identify the purpose of the reserve as set forth in the Executive Order or its directive that the reserve be administered using a precautionary management approach.” In an equally damning critique, the Commission observes that the NOS “description of Hawaiian monk seals did not reflect the species’ endangered status or identify any of the major threats, such as entanglement in marine debris, commercial fishing, and human disturbance, potentially affecting its recovery.”

Since the end of 2002, NOS has been engaged in a comprehensive redrafting process of the Operations Plan.

Entanglement

The MMC observes that marine debris continues to pose a serious hazard to monk seals, marine turtles, seabirds and fragile coral formations in the NWHI [see [Catch of the day](#), 5 (1): May 2002]. Species are most at risk from derelict trawl nets and fishing lines that are swept into the islands by ocean currents from unidentified locations around the Pacific Rim states. Some estimates, based on data collected in the 1990s, suggest that tens of thousands of such net fragments may have become lodged in reefs throughout the NWHI. The MMC reports that observed monk seal entanglements averaged 15 per year in the 1990s and “reached a record high of 25 in 1999.” There were only five reported incidents in 2000, eight in 2001, and 10 during 2002. The MMC also notes, however, that because field research seasons are limited in duration, it is likely that more entanglements occur than are ever reported.

The MMC’s review panel recommended that greater efforts be taken to identify the origins of marine debris, so that steps might be taken to lessen its incidence through educational means.

Shark attacks

As reported previously in TMG, shark attacks on monk seal pups at French Frigate Shoals have been a cause of concern both for NMFS researchers and scientists unconvinced by plans to cull the marauding individuals [see [Killing sharks at French Frigate Shoals is unacceptable](#), 5 (1): May 2002; [Scientists continue to target shark cull](#), 5 (2): November 2002].

The MMC reports that, so far, shark predation has been identified as a problem only on FFS, where – at least partly due to limited food resources – monk seal numbers have declined by about two-thirds since the mid-1980s.

In 1999, reports the MMC, “more than 25 per cent of the pups born on the atoll (25 of 92) were thought to have been killed by Galapagos sharks patrolling two main pupping islands as close as a few feet from the beach.”

In an effort to address such serious mortalities, NMFS researchers initiated a shark tagging programme, aimed at identifying individual sharks responsible for the seal attacks. This was at least partly based on the hypothesis that the attacks were motivated by learnt behaviour on the part of a few individuals.

NMFS staff also killed two sharks in 2000 and five in 2001, and subsequently reported that pup mortalities due to shark attacks had been reduced to six and nine animals respectively. During that period, however, some weaned monk seal pups were translocated to other islands within the atoll.

During 2002, NMFS – with backing from the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team – sought permission to increase the shark cull to 15 per year in 2002-2003. The MMC review panel applauds such efforts, and even goes on to suggest that efforts to eradicate problem sharks and thus reduce pup mortality have proceeded too slowly.

For some researchers however, impacts of shark removal upon the marine ecosystem remain uncertain – perhaps for good reason.

Two sharks were killed during the 2002 field season on Trig Island of FFS, and only three shark-related pup deaths were reported from the island. However, in a possibly alarming indication of things to come, the MMC reports that “efforts to tag and kill sharks patrolling the beach have made them more wary and difficult to tag and catch. Thus, tagging efforts have had limited success. Also, shark-related deaths at atoll islands other than Trig and Whaleskate rose sharply in 2002 to eight pups. Whether these were sharks accustomed to preying on monk seal pups at Trig and Whaleskate or new individuals is not known.”

Recovery Team to be reformed

The Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team was founded in 1980 by NMFS. The MMC reports that NMFS decided to reconstitute the team in 2001 and request that it update its original 1983 recovery plan. Composed of agency officials and marine mammal experts, the new team met for the first time in March 2002. With additional assistance from the MMC, the team expects to provide an updated draft recovery plan by the end of 2003.

Monk seals colonise the Main Hawaiian Islands

As reported in previous issues of TMG, sightings and births of monk seals on the main, inhabited Hawaiian Islands continue to increase, posing something of a dilemma for scientists and conservationists [see [Monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands](#), TMG 3 (1): May 2000]. Historically, the seal’s presence in the ‘downtown’ islands appears to have been rare. The MMC reports that the total number of seals now inhabiting the main Hawaiian Islands “likely numbers at least 100...” lifting prospects for the species’ recovery as well as raising significant conservation challenges.

Predictably, with more seals also comes more human harassment, particularly where the animals are occupying popular bathing and surfing beaches [see [More harassment in islands ‘downtown’](#) 5 (1): May 2002]. Stringent regulations in effect to prevent human disturbance of seals – which can result in sections of popular beaches being cordoned-off to preserve the privacy of the sun-loafing animals – has led to increasing public resentment in some quarters. The MMC reports that such protection measures “can have significant impacts on local tourist-based economies and have raised concerns among some residents and local businesses about the presence of seals on beaches.”

The MMC advisory panel concluded that “occupation of the main Hawaiian Islands by seals could significantly enhance the species’ recovery and, if properly managed, could provide a valuable economic benefit, given widespread interest in ecotourism and marine mammals” – a comment that scholars of wise or sustainable use will surely find interesting.

Responding to the panel’s recommendation, the MMC, NMFS and the Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources jointly convened a workshop on Kauai in late October 2002 to evaluate the monk seal’s presence on the main Hawaiian Islands, and to design management actions that may be required.

Courtesy of the MMC, the Workshop report (including a summary of invited papers and presentations) is also available for download from the [Monachus Library](#):

Marine Mammal Commission. 2003. Hawaiian monk seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*). Pages 79-95 in Chapter III, Species of Special Concern, Annual Report to Congress, 2002. Marine Mammal Commission, Bethesda, Maryland.

MMC/NMFS. 2003. Workshop on the management of Hawaiian monk seals on beaches in the Main Hawaiian Islands. 29-31 October 2002, Kauai Sheraton Resort Koloa, Kauai, Hawaii. Cosponsored by Marine Mammal Commission, National Marine Fisheries Service, Hawaii Division of Aquatic Resources. Final Report, January 2003: 1-58.

Other Hawaiian highlights

Cover Story:

[Northwestern Hawaiian Islands – Creating A Pu'uhonua for Future Generations](#) – by Cha Smith

In the [Monachus Library](#):

KAHEA. The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance. 2003. The Hawaiian monk seal: On the verge of extinction [Brochure]: 1-2.

KAHEA. The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance. 2003. Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Spring 2003 Factsheet: 1-4.

EndQuote

2 tourists investigated in alleged harassment of seal

“Two Colorado tourists who apparently harassed an endangered, possibly pregnant monk seal on the beach of the Big Island’s Pololu Valley on Wednesday are under investigation for violation of a state conservation law... The incident was reported by North Kohala businessman John Flynn, who supplied photos, including one of a man with his arm extended forward five feet from the seal’s face.

Flynn said the man was waving his hand in the seal’s face and shouting at it. The man continued even after Flynn shouted for him to stop, he said.

The seal had been half asleep but spun around and barked when the man approached behind the animal, Flynn said. The seal then crawled around the man and swam out to sea, he said.

The men could receive up to a year in jail and a fine of \$250 or more under state law.”

Source: Rod Thompson, Honolulu Star-Bulletin, Saturday, March 22, 2003

<http://starbulletin.com/2003/03/22/news/story9.html>

Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve

