

HO'OKAHI NO KA 'ĀINA A ME NA KĀNAKA

KAHEA

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FEDERAL GOVERNMENT HEEDS LOCAL CALL TO INCREASE PROTECTIONS FOR THE HAWAIIAN MONK SEAL
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE June 11, 2009

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HONOLULU, June 11, 2009 -- KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance has successfully petitioned the federal government to expand critical habitat designations for the highly endangered Hawaiian monk seals.

On Friday, the federal government is expected to release a new report supporting the request for additional monk seal habitat that was jointly made last summer by KAHEA, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Ocean Conservancy. The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration will use this report as a basis for new regulations expanding current federal protections to include deeper waters in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and certain shorelines in the main islands. This critical habitat designation will not affect fishing, surfing or other recreational use of the ocean or beaches, but will restrict federally funded activities and actions that require federal permits, such as channel dredging, military activities or coastal development.

"Expanding the Hawaiian monk seal's critical habitat is essential to protecting an animal vital to Hawaiian culture, an animal that is found only in Hawaii," said Marti Townsend, Program Director at KAHEA. "By protecting habitat from dredging, military use, and development, the critical habitat designation will benefit not only Hawaiian monk seals but anyone who uses the beaches and oceans for sustenance, sport and recreation."

"What's good for the monk seals is good for surfers, fishermen, paddlers -- anyone who uses the beach and ocean for recreation and traditional practices," she said.

With an estimated population of 1,200, the Hawaiian monk seal, or 'Ilioholoikauaua, is one of the most endangered marine mammals in the United States. The monk seal is endemic to the Hawaiian Archipelago where it has resided for at least 15 million years. Today, competition and interaction with commercial fishing operations, loss of habitat to sea level rise, and entanglement in marine debris has pushed this truly Native Hawaiian species to the verge of extinction.

Although the overall monk seal population is in decline, the mammal has moved increasingly to the Main Hawaiian Islands where there is less competition for food from other monk seals and large predator fish such as sharks and jacks. NOAA expects this trend to continue as rising ocean levels push seals out of the low-lying atolls and small islands that make up the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

"What happens in the coming few years will determine the survival of this species," Townsend said. "We cannot afford the extinction of a creature so sacred in Hawaiian culture and endemic to these islands. And we cannot expect to save this species without engaging in the hard task of meaningfully protecting habitat."

Critical habitat designation will mean greater protection of Hawaiian monk seal habitat under the Endangered Species Act. Critical habitat protection does not close areas, or create a refuge, but will limit federal government activities that could harm monk seals or their habitat. Once designated, any federal activities that may affect the critical habitat, including granting federal permits, must undergo review to ensure that those activities will not destroy or adversely modify the habitat deemed essential to the seal's recovery.

A draft of the federal regulations detailing the areas of habitat to be protected will be released for public review and comment in the coming months. To participate in this process, people can sign the petition in support of better protections for Hawaiian monk seals at www.KAHEA.org.

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