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HAWAIIAN MONK SEAL (*Monachus schauinslandi*)

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Hawaiian monk seals are distributed predominantly in six Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) subpopulations at French Frigate Shoals, Laysan and Lisianski Islands, Pearl and Hermes Reef, and Midway and Kure Atoll. Small numbers also occur at Necker, Nihoa, and the main Hawaiian Islands (MHI). Genetic variation among NWHI monk seals is extremely low and may reflect both a long-term history at low population levels and more recent human influences (Kretzmann et al. 1997, 2001). On average, 10-15% of the seals migrate among the NWHI subpopulations (Johnson and Kridler 1983; Harting 2002). Thus, the NWHI subpopulations are not isolated, though the different island subpopulations have exhibited considerable demographic independence. Observed interchange of individuals among the NWHI and MHI regions is extremely rare, suggesting these may be more appropriately designated as separate stocks. Further evaluation of a separate MHI stock will be pursued following genetic stock structure analysis (currently underway) and additional studies of MHI monk seals. In the mean time, the species is managed as a single stock.

POPULATION SIZE

The best estimate of the total population size is 1,247. This estimate is the sum of estimated abundance at the six main Northwest Hawaiian Islands subpopulations, an extrapolation of counts at Necker and Nihoa Islands, and an estimate of minimum abundance in the main Hawaiian Islands. The number of individual seals identified was used as the population estimate at NWHI sites where total enumeration was achieved according to the criteria established by Baker et al. (2006). Where total enumeration was not achieved, capture-recapture estimates from Program CAPTURE were used (Baker 2004; Otis et al. 1978, Rexstad & Burnham 1991, White et al. 1982). When no reliable estimator was obtainable in Program CAPTURE (i.e., the model selection criterion was < 0.75, following Otis et al. 1978), the total number of seals identified was the best available estimate. Finally, sometimes capture-recapture estimates are less than the known minimum abundance (Baker 2004), and in these cases the total number of seals identified was used. In 2005, identification efforts were conducted during two- to six-month studies at all main reproductive sites. Total enumeration was achieved at Midway Atoll, and capture-recapture estimates were obtained at the remaining sites. At Pearl and Hermes Reef and Kure Atoll, this estimate was lower than the known minimum abundance, so that the latter was considered the best estimate. The total abundance estimate at the six main subpopulations in 2005 was 1,072 seals (including 163 pups) . Monk seals also occur at Necker and Nihoa Islands, where counts are conducted from zero to a few times in a single year. Abundance is estimated by correcting the mean of all beach counts accrued over the past five years. The mean (±SD) of all counts (excluding pups) conducted between 2001 and 2005 was 14.4 (±4.3) at Necker Island and 17.7 (±8.3) at Nihoa Island (Johanos and Baker 2004, 2005, in press, in prep.). The relationship between mean counts and total abundance at the reproductive sites indicates that the total abundance can be estimated by multiplying the mean count by a correction factor of 2.89 (NMFS unpubl. data). Resulting estimates (plus the average number of pups known to have been born during 2001-2005) are 43.3 (±12.5) at Necker Island and 54.9 (±24.0) at Nihoa Island.

The only complete and systematic surveys for monk seals in the MHI were conducted in 2000 and 2001 (Baker and Johanos 2004). The NMFS collects information on seal sightings reported by a variety of sources. Recently, the number of such reports has increased and related database improvement efforts have been underway. The total number of individually identifiable seals documented in this way in 2005 was 77, the current best minimum abundance estimate.

Minimum Population Estimate

The total number of seals (1,065) identified at the six main NWHI reproductive sites is the best estimate of minimum population size at those sites. Minimum population sizes for Necker and Nihoa Islands (based on the formula provided by Wade and Angliss (1997)) are 34 and 39, respectively. The minimum abundance estimate for the main Hawaiian Islands in 2005 is 77 seals. The minimum population size for the entire stock (species) is the sum of these estimates, or 1,214 seals.

Current Population Trend

The total of mean non-pup beach counts at the six main reproductive NWHI subpopulations in 2005 is 67% lower than in 1958. The trend in total abundance at the six main NWHI subpopulations estimated as described above is shown in Figure 1. A log-linear regression of estimated abundance on year from 1998 (the first year for which a reliable total abundance estimate has been obtained) to 2005 estimates that abundance declined -3.8% yr^{-1} (95% CI = -5.0% to -2.6% yr^{-1}).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Trends in abundance vary considerably among the six main subpopulations. Mean non-pup beach counts are used as a long-term index of abundance for years when data are insufficient to estimate total abundance as described above). Beach counts at French Frigate Shoals declined 73% from 1989-2005. Populations at Laysan and Lisianski Islands have remained relatively stable since approximately 1990, though the former has tended to increase slightly while the latter has decreased slowly.

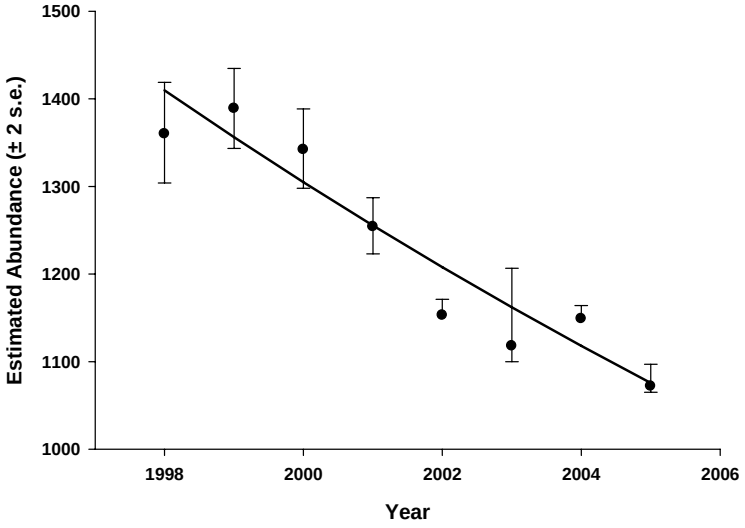

Figure 1. Trend in abundance of monk seals at the six main Northwestern Hawaiian Islands subpopulations, based on a combination of total enumeration and capture–recapture estimates. Error bars indicate ±2 s.e. (from variances of capture-recapture estimates). Fitted log-linear regression line is shown.

Until recently, the three westernmost subpopulations, Kure, Midway and Pearl and Hermes Reef exhibited substantial growth. The subpopulation at Pearl and Hermes Reef increased after the mid-1970s. Prior to 1999, beach count increases of up to 7%yr^{-1} were observed. This is the highest estimate of the maximum net productivity rate (R_{max}) observed for this species. Since 2000, low juvenile survival, thought to be due largely to food limitation, has been widespread with rare exception in the NWHI, resulting in the population decline (Fig. 1). While the MHI monk seal population may be on the rise (Baker and Johanos 2004), this remains unconfirmed and abundance appears to be too low to strongly influence current total stock trends.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

Potential biological removal (PBR) is designed to allow stocks to recover to, or remain above, the maximum net productivity level (MNPL) (Wade 1998). An underlying assumption in the application of the PBR equation is that marine mammal stocks exhibit certain dynamics. Specifically, it is assumed that a depleted stock will naturally grow toward OSP (Optimum Sustainable Population), and that some surplus growth could be removed while still allowing recovery. The Hawaiian monk seal population is far below historical levels and has declined 3.8% yr^{-1} on average since 1998. Thus, for unknown reasons, the stock's dynamics do not conform to the underlying model for calculating PBR such that PBR for the Hawaiian monk seal is undetermined.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Human-related mortality has caused two major declines of the Hawaiian monk seal (Ragen 1999). In the 1800s, this species was decimated by sealers, crews of wrecked vessels, and guano and feather hunters (Dill and Bryan 1912; Wetmore 1925; Bailey 1952; Clapp and Woodward 1972). Following a period of at least partial recovery in the first half of the 20th century (Rice 1960), most subpopulations again declined. This second decline

has not been fully explained, but trends at several sites appear to have been determined by human disturbance from military or U.S. Coast Guard activities (Ragen 1999; Kenyon 1972; Gerrodette and Gilmartin 1990). Currently, human activities in the NWHI are limited and human disturbance is relatively rare, but human-seal interactions have become an important issue in the MHI.

Fishery Information

Fishery interactions with monk seals can include direct interaction with gear (hooking or entanglement), seal consumption of discarded catch, and competition for prey. Entanglement of monk seals in derelict fishing gear, which is believed to originate outside the Hawaiian archipelago, is described in a separate section below.

In the past, monk seal interactions with fisheries in the NWHI were documented, but direct interactions have since become rare or non-existent, and issues related to competition have also somewhat abated. For example, in 1986 a seal died from entanglement in the bridle rope of lobster trap set in the NWHI lobster fishery. Possible reduction of monk seal prey by that fishery (through removal of both target and bycatch species) has also been raised as a concern, though whether the fishery indirectly impacted monk seals remains unresolved. However, the NWHI lobster fishery closed in 2000 and on June 15, 2006, President Bush signed a proclamation that created the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument. Subsequent regulations prohibit commercial fishing in the Monument except for the bottomfish fishery (and associated pelagic species catch), which may continue for no more than 5 years (U.S. Department of Commerce and Department of the Interior, 2006). In the past, interactions between the Hawaii-based domestic pelagic longline fishery and monk seals were documented (NMFS 2002). This fishery targets swordfish and tunas and does not compete with Hawaiian monk seals for prey. In October 1991, in response to 13 unusual seal wounds thought to have resulted from interactions with this fishery, NMFS established a Protected Species Zone extending 50 nautical miles around the NWHI and the corridors between the islands. Subsequently, no additional monk seal interactions with the longline fishery have been confirmed. Since 1991, there have been no observed or reported interactions of this fishery with monk seals.

The NWHI bottomfish handline fishery has been reported to interact with monk seals. This fishery landed between 95 and 201 metric tons per year from 1989-2005 (Kawamoto 1995; Kawamoto, pers. comm.) and the number of vessels is currently capped at 9 (8 made NWHI trips in 2005, Kawamoto, pers. comm.). Nitta and Henderson (1993) documented reports of seals taking bottomfish and bait off fishing lines, and reports of seals attracted to discarded bycatch. A Federal observer program of the fishery began in the fourth quarter of 2003 and no monk seal interactions have been observed to date. NMFS prepared a Section 7 Biological Opinion on the Fishery Management Plan for the bottomfish fishery, and concluded that the operation of this fishery is not likely to jeopardize the continued existence of the Hawaiian monk seal nor would it likely destroy or adversely modify the monk seal's critical habitat (NMFS 2002). The Biological Opinion has no incidental take statement. An EIS for the bottomfish fishery management plan has also been prepared. Fishermen indicate that they have engaged in mitigating activity over the past several years, e.g., holding discards on-board, etc. (NMFS pers. comm.). The ecological effects of this fishery on monk seals (e.g., competition for prey or alteration of prey assemblages) are unknown. However, published studies on monk seal prey selection based upon scat/spew analysis and seal-mounted video revealed some evidence that monk seals fed on families of bottomfish which contain commercial species (many prey items recovered from scats and spews were identified only to the level of family; Goodman-Lowe 1998, Longenecker et al. 2006, Parrish et al. 2000). Recent efforts have expanded bottomfish species representation in a fatty acid library to help clarify their potential importance in the monk seal diet using quantitative fatty acid signature analysis. Results of this research effort are expected to be available in 2007. As noted above, this fishery is slated to be closed by 2011.

In contrast to the NWHI, fishery interactions are a serious concern in the MHI, especially involving State of Hawaii managed nearshore fisheries. One seal was found dead in a nearshore (non-recreational) gillnet in 1994 and a second seal was found dead in 1995 with a hook lodged in its esophagus. A total of 32 seals have been observed with embedded hooks in the MHI during 1990-2005. Several incidents, including the dead hooked seal mentioned above, involved hooks used to catch ulua (jacks, *Caranx* spp.). Interactions in the MHI appear to be on the rise, as most hookings have occurred since 2000, and three seals have been observed entangled in nearshore gillnets since 2002 (NMFS unpubl. data). The 2005 nearshore fishery serious injury, reported in Table 1, involved a seal observed entangled and struggling in a nearshore gillnet off Oahu. By the time a NMFS contract veterinarian arrived on the scene, the seal was gone and fishermen were retrieving the net, which had a large hole presumably where the seal had been caught. Because it was not possible to determine whether the seal escaped uninjured, entangled, or whether it had died, this case was judged as a serious injury. The MHI bottomfish handline fishery also has potential to interact with monk seals, though no mortalities or serious injuries have been attributed to the fishery (Table 1).

Table 1. Summary of mortality and serious injury of Hawaiian monk seals due to fisheries and calculation of annual mortality rate. n/a indicates that sufficient data are not available.

Fishery Name	Year	Data Type	% Obs. coverage	Observed/Reported Mortality/Serious Injury	Estimated Mortality/ Serious Injury	Mean Takes (CV)
NWHI Lobster	2000-present	fishery closed				
Pelagic Longline	2001 2002 2003 2004 2005	observer observer observer observer observer	22.5% 24.6% 22.2% 24.6% 26.1% & 100%[1]	0 0 0 0 0	0 0 0 0 0	0 (0)
NWHI Bottomfish	2001-2002 2003[2] 2004 2005	Logbook observer observer observer	n/a 33% 18.3% 25.0%	n/a 0 0 0	n/a 0 0 0	0 (0)
MHI Bottomfish[3]	2001 2002 2003 2004 2005	n/a	none	0 0 0 0 0 0	n/a	n/a
Nearshore[3]	2001 2002 2003 2004 2005	n/a	none	0 1 1 1 2 1	n/a	n/a

Fishery Mortality Rate

Total fishery mortality and serious injury cannot be considered to be insignificant and approaching a rate of zero. Monk seals are being hooked and entangled in the MHI at a rate which has not been reliably assessed. The information above represents only reported direct interactions and without purpose-designed observation effort the true interaction rate cannot be estimated. Monk seals also die from entanglement in fishing gear and other debris throughout their range (likely originating from various countries), and NMFS along with partner agencies, is pursuing a program to mitigate entanglement (see below). Indirect interactions (i.e., involving competition for prey or consumption of discards) remain the topic of ongoing investigation.

Entanglement in Marine Debris

Hawaiian monk seals become entangled in fishing and other marine debris at rates higher than reported for other pinnipeds (Henderson 2001). A total of 261 cases of seals entangled in fishing gear or other debris have been observed through 2005 (Henderson 2001; NMFS, unpubl. data), including seven documented mortalities resulting from entanglement in fisheries debris (Henderson 1990, 2001; NMFS, unpubl. data). The fishing gear fouling the reefs and beaches of the NWHI and entangling monk seals only rarely includes types used in Hawaiian fisheries. For example, trawl net and monofilament gillnet accounted for approximately 35% and 34% of the debris removed from reefs in the NWHI by weight, and trawl net alone accounted for 88% of the debris by frequency (Donohue et al. 2001). Yet there are no commercial trawl fisheries in Hawaii.

The NMFS and partner agencies continue to mitigate impacts of marine debris on monk seals as well as turtles, coral reefs and other wildlife. Marine debris is removed from beaches and entangled seals during annual population assessment activities at the main reproductive sites. Since 1996, annual debris survey and removal efforts in the NWHI coral reef habitat have been ongoing (Donohue et al. 2000, Donohue et al. 2001).

Other Mortality

Since 1982, 23 seals died during rehabilitation efforts; additionally, two died in captivity, two died when captured for translocation, one was euthanized (an aggressive male known to cause mortality), three died during

[1] Observer coverage for deep and shallow-set components of the fishery, respectively.

[2] Observer coverage began in fourth quarter of 2003. Data for that quarter provided.

[3] Data for MHI bottomfish and nearshore fisheries are based upon incidental observations (i.e., hooked seals). All hookings not clearly attributable to either fishery with certainty were attributed to the bottomfish fishery, and hookings which resulted in injury of unknown severity were classified as serious.

captive research and three died during field research (Baker and Johanos 2002). In 2005, a weaned pup died while in NMFS care at a captive facility on Oahu for testing and potential treatment for leptospirosis. Post-mortem examination did not reveal a cause of death.

In 1986, a weaned pup died at East Island, French Frigate Shoals, after becoming entangled in wire left when the U.S. Coast Guard abandoned the island three decades earlier. In 1991, a seal died after becoming trapped behind an eroding seawall on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals. The only documented case of illegal killing of a Hawaiian monk seal occurred when a resident of Kauai killed an adult female in 1989.

Other sources of mortality that impede recovery include food limitation (see Habitat Issues below), single and multiple-male aggression (mobbing), shark predation, and disease/parasitism. Multiple-male aggression has primarily been identified as a problem at Laysan and Lisianski Islands, though it has also been documented at other subpopulations. In 1994, 22 adult males were removed from Laysan Island, and only five seals are thought to have died from multiple-male aggression at this site since their removal (1995-2005).

Attacks by single adult males have resulted in several monk seal mortalities, most notably at French Frigate Shoals in 1997, where at least 8 pups died from this cause. Many more pups were likely killed in the same way but the cause of their deaths could not be confirmed. Two males that killed pups in 1997 were translocated to Johnston Atoll, 870 km to the southwest. Subsequently, mounting injury to pups has decreased.

Shark-related injury and mortality incidents appeared to have increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s at French Frigate Shoals, but such mortality was probably not the primary cause of the decline at this site (Ragen 1993). However, shark predation has accounted for a significant portion of pup mortality in recent years. At French Frigate Shoals in 1999, 17 pups were observed injured by large sharks, and at least 3 were confirmed to have died from shark predation (Johanos and Baker 2001). As many as 22 pups of a total 92 born at French Frigate Shoals in 1999 were likely killed by sharks. After 1999, losses of pups to shark predation have been fewer, but this source of mortality remains a serious concern. Various mitigation efforts have been undertaken by NMFS in cooperation with the U. S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS), which manages French Frigate Shoals as part of the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

An Unusual Mortality Event (UME) contingency plan has recently been published for the monk seal (Yochem et al. 2004). While disease effects on monk seal demographic trends are uncertain, there is concern that diseases of livestock, feral animals, pets or humans could be transferred to naive monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands and potentially spread to the core population in the NWHI. Recent diagnoses (R. Braun, pers. comm.) confirm that in 2003 and 2004, two deaths of free-ranging monk seals are attributable to diseases not previously found in the species: leptospirosis and toxoplasmosis. Leptospira bacteria are found in many of Hawaii's streams and estuaries and are associated with livestock and rodents. Cats, domestic and feral, are a common source of toxoplasma.

STATUS OF STOCK

In 1976, the Hawaiian monk seal was designated depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The species is well below its OSP and has not recovered from past declines. Therefore, the Hawaiian monk seal is characterized as a strategic stock.

Habitat Issues

Vessel groundings pose a continuing threat to monk seals and their habitat, through potential physical damage to reefs, oil spills, and release of debris into habitats. The substantial decline at French Frigate Shoals is likely related to lack of available prey and subsequent emaciation and starvation. Two leading hypotheses to explain the lack of prey are 1) the local population reached its carrying capacity in the 1970s and 1980s, diminishing its own food supply, and 2) carrying capacity was simultaneously reduced by changes in oceanographic conditions and a subsequent decline in productivity (Polovina et al. 1994; Craig and Ragen 1999). Similarly, recently observed poor juvenile survival rates suggest that prey availability may be limiting recovery of other NWHI subpopulations.

Goodman-Lowe (1998) provided information on prey selection using hard parts in scats and spewings. Information on at-sea movement and diving is available for seals at all six main subpopulations in the NWHI using satellite telemetry (Stewart et al. 2006). Preliminary studies to describe the foraging habitat of monk seals in the MHI are reported in Littnan et al. (2006).

Tern Island is the site of a USFWS refuge station, and is one of two sites in the NWHI accessible by aircraft. During World War II, the U.S. Navy enlarged the island to accommodate the runway, and a sheet-pile seawall was constructed to maintain the modified shape of the island. Degradation of the seawall created entrapment hazards for seals and other wildlife. Erosion of the sea wall also raised concerns about the potential release of toxic wastes into the ocean. The USFWS began construction on the Tern Island sea wall in 2004 to reduce entrapment

hazards and protect the island shoreline. The USFWS considers this a high priority project to complete, and is pursuing funding to that end.

Another habitat issue involves loss of terrestrial habitat at French Frigate Shoals, where pupping and resting islets have shrunk or virtually disappeared (Antonelis et al. 2006). Projected increases in global average sea level (Church et al. 2001) may further significantly reduce terrestrial habitat for monk seals in the NWHI (Baker, Littnan and Johnston, 2006).

There are indications that monk seal abundance is increasing in the main Hawaiian Islands (Baker and Johanos 2004). Further, the excellent condition of pups weaned on these islands suggests that there may be ample prey resources available. If the monk seal population does expand in the MHI, it may bode well for the species' recovery and long-term persistence. In contrast, there are many challenges that may limit the potential for growth in this region. The human population in the MHI is approximately 1.2 million compared to fewer than 100 in the NWHI, so that the potential impact of disturbance in the MHI is great. As noted above, the hooking of monk seals by fishermen in the MHI is another source of injury and mortality. Finally, vessel traffic in the populated islands carries the potential for collision with seals and impacts from oil spills. Thus, issues surrounding monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands will likely become an increasing focus for management and recovery of this species.

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