



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Contact: Giancarlo Rulli, 415-754-4012, media@tmmc.org

Endangered Hawaiian monk seal released back to Kaua'i after rehabilitation at Ke Kai Ola, a dedicated hospital for monk seals on Hawai'i Island

(Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i – February 14, 2019) – A Hawaiian monk seal pup rescued on Kaua'i has been returned to the island after successful rehabilitation at Ke Kai Ola, The Marine Mammal Center's hospital and visitor center in Kailua-Kona that is dedicated to the endangered marine mammal. The male pup, RK58, was born on July 16, 2018, to monk seal RH58 (Rocky), and involved in a switch with another mom-pup pair on the same beach.

"RK58 was a challenging case, and it was clear after months of rehabilitative work that he would not have survived on his own in the wild," says Dr. Claire Simeone, the Center's Hospital Director at Ke Kai Ola. "We are thrilled that he has learned the skills he needs to successfully forage, and that he has a second chance at life back on Kaua'i."

Pup switches are a natural occurrence that are observed annually in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, but are less common in the Main Hawaiian Islands due to the lower density of moms and pups. Earlier this year, experts from The Marine Mammal Center and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) successfully rehabilitated Sole, a young male pup born on Moloka'i that was also involved in a mom-pup pair switch, the first time a rescue effort was made in response to this behavior in the Main Hawaiian Islands.

"As we do with all our monk seal moms and pups, we worked hard to ensure Rocky had a successful nursing period. We did everything we could to keep Rocky and her pup together, but despite our best efforts, Rocky stopped nursing her pup and we had to intervene to save the pup's life," says Jamie Thomson, the Kaua'i Marine Mammal Response Program Coordinator with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service. "However, we are fortunate that the Hawaiian monk seal hospital Ke Kai Ola is prepared to accept orphaned pups like RK58."

RK58 is the youngest monk seal rehabilitated at Ke Kai Ola. It took him several months to learn how to eat fish on his own, but in the six months that he was at Ke Kai Ola, he nearly doubled in body weight. Dr. Simeone and her team performed a release examination on RK58 and noted that he was healthy and ready for release. RK58 was approved for release back to his birthplace on Kaua'i. RK58 will be monitored by volunteers in the Kaua'i Marine Mammal Response Network, and a satellite tag has been placed to track RK58's movement and ensure he is thriving in the wild.

Dr. Simeone accompanied RK58 on a charter flight with Kamaka Air Cargo, which was generously donated by a private donor. In order to ensure that he had acclimated back to his environment, RK58 was monitored in a beach pen for two days before being released on a remote Kaua'i beach. The Marine Mammal Center, NOAA's Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resources, and Kaua'i Marine Mammal Response Network volunteers all contributed to RK58's transport and release.

“This was an excellent example of the public-private partnerships needed for conservation success,” said Dr. Simeone. “Conservation takes a village, and endangered Hawaiian monk seals benefit when our communities are inspired to contribute in such an impactful way.”

It is rare to rescue a monk seal pup from the Main Hawaiian Islands, and this young pup is only the third pup from the main islands to be rehabilitated by the Center. Rocky’s birth of RK-58 comes a year after she garnered news headlines for giving birth to the first pup ever recorded on Waikīkī Beach in 2017. The Marine Mammal Center is a member of the Pacific Island Region Marine Mammal Response Network and is responsible for monitoring the seals that haul out on Hawai‘i Island.

The Marine Mammal Center has rehabilitated 27 monk seals since opening Ke Kai Ola in 2014, the majority of which were rescued from the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The Center is proud to partner with NOAA to support conservation efforts for the Hawaiian monk seal. Researchers estimate the current monk seal population to be about 1,400 animals, and about 30 percent of those monk seals are alive today directly due to conservation efforts led by NOAA and its partners.

HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP

Members of the public should keep a safe distance from monk seals and report sightings on Hawai‘i Island to the Center’s response team at the 24-hour hotline: 808-987-0765. On Kaua‘i, report monk seal sightings to 808-651-7668.

Volunteers are needed at the Kona hospital and visitor center in a variety of roles, including animal care, education and response. Interested individuals should visit MarineMammalCenter.org/KKO-volunteer to learn more about the opportunities available.

INTERVIEWS

Please contact Media@tmmc.org to arrange interviews.

ASSETS

Images of RK58 are available for download and media use here:

https://www.dropbox.com/sh/c6sqnoes224bfkj/AAC4cLpBJSuyid9WtAzBUb3_a?dl=0

Find credit and caption information in a Word document in this folder.

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER

The Marine Mammal Center is guided and inspired by a shared vision of a healthy ocean for marine mammals and humans alike. Our mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education. Since 1975, the Center has been headquartered in the Marin Headlands, Sausalito, Calif., within the Golden Gate National Parks and has rescued and treated over 20,000 marine mammals. In 2014, the Center opened Ke Kai Ola, a hospital and visitor center dedicated to the endangered Hawaiian monk seal, in Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i. Ke Kai Ola recently launched a new middle-school marine science program and participates in a number of education and community outreach programs on its own and with community partners.

For more information, please visit MarineMammalCenter.org. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).

###