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The Marine Mammal Center Aids Endangered Twin Hawaiian Monk Seals

(SAUSALITO, Calif. – June 8, 2006) In a unique collaboration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (FWS) and National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration Fisheries Service (NOAA) has consulted with The Marine Mammal Center in the care of rare, twin, female Hawaiian monk seals born on Midway Atoll in early April. The Hawaiian monk seal is the most endangered pinniped in the U.S. with a population estimated to be around 1200. The Marine Mammal Center will help in the care of the undersized twins, at the Kewalo Research Facility in Honolulu. Tenaya Norris, a researcher at The Marine Mammal Center, will act as the captive care coordinator, organizing Hawaiian Monk Seal program volunteers to care for the seals.

“We plan on continuing to assist NOAA and FWS to get these animals healthy enough to be re-introduced back to Midway Atoll,” said Frances Gulland, Director of Veterinary Science at The Marine Mammal Center. “Monk seal pups, especially females, are important to conserve if the population is to ever increase in a productive way. We are thrilled to be able to lend our marine mammal expertise in this captive care initiative.”

The seals weaned at around 70 pounds instead of the normal 150 pounds. This was of concern to researchers who determined that the seals needed additional food in a captive environment in order to increase their chances of survival. “These twins, identified as R22 and R26, are acclimating nicely to their pool and they’re digesting fish and fluids well,” said Dr. Robert Braun, contract marine mammal veterinarian for the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center. “These seals have a long road ahead because they need to accumulate enough fat stores to sufficiently support them long enough while they learn how to feed in the wild.”

The endangered monk seal is in a crisis situation and its numbers could fall below 1,000 within the next five years. A variety of factors over the past decade have caused the dramatic decrease in the population including disturbance by human activities and shark predation.

In the fall of 2004, The Marine Mammal Center sent a team to French Frigate Shoals in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in a collaborative effort with NOAA Fisheries Service monk seal program. There, they observed juvenile monk seals and documented each seal’s body condition using repetitive digital imaging, which is a way of comparing a series of pictures to highlight the differences among them. The images will help researchers further understand the decline of the species.

Headquartered in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area in Sausalito, California, **The Marine Mammal Center** is a nonprofit hospital dedicated to the rescue and rehabilitation of ill and injured marine mammals, and to the research of their health and diseases. Volunteers and staff have treated more than 12,000 California sea lions, elephant seals, porpoises, and other marine mammals, along 600-miles of coastline stretching from Mendocino County to San Luis Obispo County. Staff and volunteers uniquely combine rehabilitation with scientific discovery and education programs to advance the understanding of marine mammal health, ocean health and conservation.

On the Web: www.marinemammalcenter.org

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