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Veterinarians diagnose infection due to trauma in complex case of RH38, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal in rehabilitation at The Marine Mammal Center's hospital for monk seals

(Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i – May 16, 2019) – Experts at The Marine Mammal Center report positive developments in the perplexing case of Hawaiian monk seal RH38. A CT scan performed in late-April showed muscle inflammation and infection in RH38's back flippers, which spread to her bloodstream and caused a wide range of other problems. Based on the location and extent of the muscle damage, the Center's veterinarians suspect trauma as the initial cause of the injury, though the source is unknown.

"Wild animals mask pain and injury, so internal injuries can be well hidden, unlike more obvious external wounds," says Dr. Claire Simeone, The Marine Mammal Center's Hospital Director at Ke Kai Ola. "We're elated to discover the diagnosis for this complex case, as each individual is critical to restoring this endangered population."

RH38 is stable, but remains in critical condition 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 Center's veterinary experts are currently treating her with antibiotics, pain medications and laser therapy, and are optimistic that she will continue to improve.

The likely trauma that caused her injury may have been natural or human-induced, whether accidental or intentional. Natural causes of trauma include interactions with predators or other seals, and a variety of hazards such as debris in heavy surf and eroding rocks along shorelines where seals haul-out to rest. Accidental sources of trauma can include a boat strike or vehicle injury. While rare, there have been confirmed cases of intentional trauma inflicted on seals by people.

"We always ask residents and visitors state-wide to be aware of seals that are or might be hauled out on beaches, for the safety of people and seals," says Dr. Claire Simeone, The Marine Mammal Center's Hospital Director at Ke Kai Ola. "We encourage beachgoers to share space with marine wildlife and report any interactions, whether accidental or intentional, so that responders can quickly assess the affected animal."

RH38 was molting at the time of her rescue, a natural annual process in which monk seals shed their hair and skin. Veterinarians suspect that some aspect of immunosuppression related to her molt may have played a role in her inability to deal with the infection caused by the trauma.

As a result of her sepsis, RH38 had infections in a variety of organs. She has been successfully treated for pneumonia and corneal damage, both of which have resolved. She also developed a

skin infection, kidney infection, resulting kidney stones and a liver infection, all of which are continuing to receive treatment and monitoring.

The Kaua'i Hawaiian Monk Seal Conservation Hui monitored RH38 over the past year and routinely observed her in good body condition. In March, she began to rapidly lose body condition. She was rescued from Kaua'i on March 12, 2019, and transported via U.S. Coast Guard flight to Ke Kai Ola. During her initial critical care period, RH38 was tested for dozens of diseases, toxins and parasites.

In late April, the Center's staff and volunteers, along with a team from NOAA, transported RH38 to North Hawai'i Community Hospital on Hawai'i Island for a CT scan. The Center's veterinary experts anesthetized her, and a scan was done on her entire body in order to more closely investigate the different organ systems that were showing signs of damage and pinpoint the source. This is the first CT scan ever performed on a wild Hawaiian monk seal.

This is RH38's second time in rehabilitation at The Marine Mammal Center. She was originally admitted to Ke Kai Ola in August of 2017 for malnutrition and a heavy parasite load. She more than doubled in body weight during her three-month rehabilitation and was successfully released back to Kaua'i. Her current condition is not thought to be related to her original admit in 2017.

The Marine Mammal Center's work in Hawai'i is dedicated to the conservation of Hawaiian monk seals. The Center is a member of the Pacific Islands Region Marine Mammal Response Network and is responsible for monitoring the seals that haul out on Hawai'i Island. The Center's marine science program, Nā Kōkua o ke Kai, serves students in grades 6 through 8 and their teachers on Hawai'i Island. Through community engagement, education, stranding response and animal care, their dedicated staff and volunteers are working to save a species.

The Marine Mammal Center has rehabilitated 27 monk seals since opening Ke Kai Ola in 2014. The Center is proud to partner with NOAA to support conservation efforts for the Hawaiian monk seal. NOAA 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 or call NOAA's statewide toll free hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

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

INTERVIEWS

Please contact Media@tmmc.org to arrange interviews.

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. Its 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 22,000 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. Its academic year-long marine science and ocean conservation program, Nā Kōkua o ke Kai, engages middle-school youth and teachers through classroom work, field trips and professional development for teachers.

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

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