



## **FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

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### **Endangered Hawaiian monk seals released on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge after rehabilitation at Ke Kai Ola, a dedicated hospital for monk seals on Hawai'i Island**

*The return of four endangered female seals back to their ocean home marks a significant boost to the population*

(Kailua-Kona, Hawai'i – August 10, 2020) - Four Hawaiian monk seals were successfully released last Wednesday on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge after 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. As an essential business operating during the ongoing pandemic, the Center is committed to continuing its core mission work that includes conservation of threatened and endangered species.

“To return four female Hawaiian monk seals back to their ocean home is an incredible success story and a significant boost to an endangered population where the survival of every individual is critical,” says Dr. Cara Field, Medical Director at The Marine Mammal Center. “This success story highlights the importance of our ongoing partnerships to help save this species.”

The seals spent more than ten months in rehabilitative care for malnutrition and other ailments. During their treatment, the underweight seals greatly improved in overall body condition. Each of the animals experienced remarkable weight gains between 110-175 pounds, some more than tripling in overall weight.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) coordinated logistical and operational support for this extraordinary release on Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and Battle of Midway National Memorial, part of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, in partnership with the U.S. Coast Guard, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the Center. The U.S. Coast Guard flew the animals directly to Midway Atoll where they were released on the day of transport.

“We are happy to welcome Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge's four newest residents,” said Stephen Barclay, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge Manager. “The protected lands and waters will provide a safe home for these endangered monk seals, alongside the over one million seabirds and other wildlife that rely on the refuge.”

The four patients were rescued last summer by NOAA Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program scientific staff who determined that chances for survival were near zero for these young seals. The *Oscar Elton Sette*, a NOAA research vessel transporting scientists and supplies to conduct monk seal research and conservation efforts in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, originally shuttled the pups to Honolulu and from there they were transported via a U.S. Coast Guard aircraft to Ke Kai Ola for long term care.

The U.S. Coast Guard stepped in to return the seals to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as the safest and fastest mode of transport during the pandemic. This year, with the impacts of COVID-19 on the safety and feasibility of remote field operations, the best option for releasing these four seals was at Midway Atoll.

“NOAA researchers rescued these four female seals as weaned pups in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in the fall of 2019,” says Conservation Veterinarian Dr. Michelle Barbieri. “They had a near zero chance of survival if left in the wild, but this effort has given them a second chance.”

The two seals rescued from Pearl and Hermes Reef, Hilina‘i and Leimana, both weaned early from their mothers and at a small size that would make winter survival a challenge. The other two seals, Maka Kilo and Ka‘ena, were a little older but still underweight during their rescue from Lisianski Island. Before release, three of the four seals were fitted with temporary satellite tags that will allow scientists to monitor them after their return to the remote atoll. The fourth seal was not fitted with a tag because she was molting. The satellite tag data will be combined with visual monitoring by researchers on Midway as possible.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 33 monk seals, most of which have been rescued from the NWHI as part of the partnership with NOAA, built on existing research in the NWHI to identify seals in need, rescue and rehabilitate them, and give them a second chance at life in their ocean home. The Center’s partnership with NOAA and other cooperating agencies is more important than ever to prevent this endangered species from becoming extinct. Approximately 30 percent of monk seals that are alive today are due to conservation efforts led by NOAA and partners like The Marine Mammal Center.

Additionally, the Center is a member of the Pacific Islands Region Marine Mammal Response Network and is responsible for monitoring the seals that haul out, or spend time on land, on Hawai‘i Island. Through community engagement, education, stranding response and animal care, dedicated staff and volunteers are working to save a species.

### **HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP**

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 or call NOAA’s statewide toll-free hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

### **ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER:**

Located on the site of a former Cold War missile base, The Marine Mammal Center is a global leader in marine mammal health, science and conservation, and is the largest marine mammal hospital in the world. The Center’s teaching hospital and training programs operate globally, with its headquarters in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, part of the National Park Service. Expert teams from the Center travel around the world to work with emerging first responders and has itself rescued more than 23,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of its authorized rescue area of California coastline and the Big Island of Hawai‘i. The Center’s mission is to advance global ocean conservation through marine mammal rescue and rehabilitation, scientific research, and education.

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