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

(KAILUA-KONA, HAWAI‘I – March 31, 2021) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, successfully released two endangered Hawaiian monk seals back to Kaua‘i and Oahu after rehabilitation at Ke Kai Ola, the Center’s hospital and visitor center in Kailua-Kona that is dedicated to the endangered marine mammal. The successful release of RK58 and Mele was made possible thanks to the Center’s partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Coast Guard, Hawai‘i Department of Land and Natural Resources (DLNR), Hawaii Marine Animal Response (HMAR) and the Marine Mammal Response Network team on Kaua‘i.

“To return two Main Hawaiian Island seals back to their ocean home is an incredible success story with the survival of each individual critical to the recovery of the population,” says Dr. Cara Field, Medical Director at The Marine Mammal Center. “This success story highlights the importance of our ongoing partnerships to help give these animals a second chance at life and save this species.”

The two seals spent more than two months in rehabilitative care for malnutrition and other ailments. RK58, a juvenile male, had a more challenging recovery after suffering severe trauma wounds to the head, neck and left front flipper from a suspected dog attack on Kaua‘i. During their treatment, the underweight seals greatly improved in overall body condition and stamina. Both animals experienced remarkable weight gains during their short stay, with Mele, a young female rescued on Oahu due to her poor condition, nearly doubling in weight.

“We are so grateful that The Marine Mammal Center was able to immediately activate and provide the intensive care that these two patients needed,” says Dr. Michelle Barbieri, Lead Scientist for NOAA’s Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program. “Their return to the wild is important for the future of the species and we are glad that they are back home.”

NOAA coordinated logistical and operational support for this extraordinary multi-island release in partnership with the U.S. Coast Guard and the Center. On Friday, March 26, the U.S. Coast Guard first flew RK58 to Kaua‘i and then Mele to Oahu via a C-130 aircraft, the safest and fastest mode of transport during the pandemic. Both animals were successfully released on the day of the transport.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 35 monk seals, most of which have been rescued from and returned to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) as part of the partnership with NOAA, utilizing resources in the NWHI to identify seals in need, rescue and rehabilitate them, and give them a second chance at life. 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.

In recent weeks, the Center's experts have reported a sharp uptick in the number of beachgoers on the Big Island as COVID-19-related travel restrictions have eased. This increase in the amount of foot traffic on local beaches comes as endangered monk seals that frequent the islands seek areas to come ashore to rest. The Center's experts kindly ask that beachgoers proceed with caution and look out for posted signage about resting seals. As a member of the Pacific Islands Region Marine Mammal Response Network, the Center is responsible for monitoring the seals that haul out, or spend time on land, on Hawai'i Island.

As an essential business operating during the ongoing pandemic, the Center is committed to continuing its core mission work that includes advancing the conservation of threatened and endangered species.

HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP

RK58's story is an important reminder that beachgoers should keep themselves and their pets a safe distance from resting monk seals. The Center strongly encourages pet owners statewide to protect native wildlife by adhering to leash laws and reporting monk seal sightings on Hawai'i Island to the Center's response team at the 24-hour hotline: 808-987-0765.

On Kaua'i and Oahu, call NOAA's statewide toll-free hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER

Headquartered 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 24,000 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. Follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#).