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Malnourished Hawaiian monk seal from Oahu arrives at Ke Kai Ola, The Marine Mammal Center's dedicated hospital for monk seals on Hawai'i Island

(KAILUA-KONA, HAWAII – February 16, 2021) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world's largest marine mammal hospital, admitted an endangered monk seal at its hospital and visitor center in Kailua-Kona. The successful rescue of Mele, a young female seal, was made possible thanks to the Center's partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Coast Guard and the Hawaii Marine Animal Response (HMAR) team. 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.

"With only a few hundred monk seals living in the Main Hawaiian Islands, the survival of each individual is critical to the recovery of the population," says Dr. Sophie Whoriskey, Hawaiian Monk Seal Conservation Veterinarian at The Marine Mammal Center. "Conservation takes a village. We are so grateful to our partners for their support in achieving our mission, and ensuring this animal has a second chance at life."

The team from HMAR and NOAA researchers have been monitoring Mele on Oahu and nearby islets since mid-November due to her poor body condition, unusual for a main Hawaiian Islands seal. NOAA experts decided to rescue and transport Mele directly to The Marine Mammal Center where veterinarians will stabilize her, look for underlying conditions that might explain her body condition, and provide long-term rehabilitative care. On Sunday, February 7, Mele was airlifted and transferred to the Center for further rehabilitation via a U.S. Coast Guard C-130 aircraft, the safest and fastest mode of transport during the pandemic.

"It's always a pleasure to work with NOAA and The Marine Mammal Center, especially when it comes to protecting endangered species. Mele was a great passenger, and we are happy to have helped," says Lt. Andrew Lucak, Coast Guard HC-130 search plane pilot, Air Station Barbers Point.

During her initial critical care period, Center experts noted that Mele was moderately malnourished but is alert and active. The Center's veterinary team also took a series of blood samples and plan to start the animal on deworming medication to help spur future weight gain.

"Mele has been feisty and extremely vocal since her arrival, which is a really positive sign for a young juvenile seal," says Dr. Whoriskey. "She has already started to feed on sustainably-caught herring and our team plans to introduce her to offers of live fish to help further spur her appetite and get the vital nutrients she needs."

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.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 33 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.

Mele, which translates in native Hawaiian to "chant or song," was gifted her name by third graders at Kamehameha Schools-Kapalama campus in Honolulu, Hawai'i.

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 Oahu, report monk seal sightings to 808-220-7802 or 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](#).