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Endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal Heads Home to Kaua‘i After Receiving Life-Saving Care at The Marine Mammal Center

Hawaiian monk seal RH38 previously received care at the Center’s Hawai‘i Island-based hospital in 2017 and 2019

(Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i – November 21, 2023) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, is happy to announce the successful release of Hawaiian monk seal RH38 back to Kaua‘i.

Since her rescue in June, the Center had been treating the adult female seal for a series of ailments including kidney stones, suspected pneumonia and a fractured upper left canine tooth at Ke Kai Ola, the Center’s Hawaiian monk seal hospital in Kailua-Kona. The successful rescue, treatment and release of RH38 was made possible thanks to the Center’s partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Kona Community Hospital and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG).

“We’re ecstatic to give an animal that’s so dear to our hearts, like RH38, another chance in the wild. Every seal matters for an endangered population,” says Dr. Sophie Whoriskey, Associate Director, Hawai‘i Conservation Medicine at The Marine Mammal Center. “It was clear during her treatment that her tooth fracture, and the associated infection, was the primary cause of her inability to thrive in the wild and we’re confident this won’t impact her anymore.”

During RH38’s nearly five months of treatment, a CT scan conducted in August by experts at Kona Community Hospital confirmed the severity of the tooth fracture and infection.

The Center’s veterinary team performed additional diagnostics including full body radiographs (X-rays), extensive abdominal ultrasound exams and submitted a series of blood samples for diagnostic testing to check for signs of toxins or infectious disease. All tests came back negative.

Animal care experts offered RH38 a hearty and calorie-rich diet of sustainably caught herring and she gained an impressive 100 pounds while in treatment.

A TIMELY RELEASE FOR A SEAL READY TO GO HOME

On November 13, experts at the Center noticed RH38 began to exhibit signs of significant behavioral stress that included the animal biting at its tail. While it’s not unusual for monk seals to display stress related behavior while in a rehabilitation setting, this seal’s stress behaviors were more severe. Fortunately, RH38 had already passed a release exam and timing worked out so that the Center’s team

and partners at NOAA and USCG were able to coordinate an immediate release in the best interest of her health.

The next day, the Center's team met with USCG crew members at Kona International Airport to help load RH38 onto a C-130 aircraft for release back to Kaua'i.

"This has truly been a monk seal 'ohana (family) effort," said Jamie Thomson, NOAA's Kaua'i Marine Wildlife Response Coordinator. "RH38's homecoming was a collective effort, and we especially want to thank our Kaua'i volunteers and community members. They've helped monitor RH38 over the years, and their reports earlier this year alerted us that something was wrong. Our Kaua'i team came together to rescue her, and with the partnership of the Center and U.S. Coast Guard, RH38 was successfully rehabilitated and released back to her Kaua'i home."

NOAA, the Hawai'i Department of Land and Natural Resource, and the rest of the Kaua'i monk seal 'ohana will continue to keep a watchful eye on RH38 as she gets back into her routines around the Garden Island.

RH38 was born in 2016 and was first admitted to Ke Kai Ola in 2017 for malnutrition and gastrointestinal parasites. She was released in good health and came back in 2019 with several health concerns, including severe traumatic myositis (muscle inflammation) that was diagnosed on CT scan, septicemic infection, kidney stones in both kidneys, urinary tract infection and presumed pneumonia.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 45 monk seals, excluding RH38 who has been released three times. Most of these seals have been rescued from and returned to Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument as part of the Center's partnership with NOAA Fisheries. Together, the Center works with NOAA to identify seals in need, rescue and rehabilitate them, and give them a second chance at life.

The Center's partnership with NOAA Fisheries and other cooperating agencies is more important than ever to prevent this endangered species from becoming extinct.

HOW THE PUBLIC CAN HELP

The public should keep a safe distance of [at least 50 yards](#) from monk seals.

Report hooked, stranded or entangled monk seals to the statewide NOAA Fisheries Marine Wildlife Hotline at 1-888-256-9840.

VOLUNTEER OPPORTUNITIES ON MAUI

The Marine Mammal Center is recruiting new volunteers for operations on Maui. Learn more about volunteering and sign up to attend upcoming virtual trainings on The Marine Mammal Center's [website](#).

Hawaiian monk seal conservation volunteers play an integral role in helping save this endangered species by monitoring and identifying seals that may require rescue and rehabilitation. Volunteers also provide valuable public outreach to help raise awareness about the risks of human and pet interactions, and why this native animal is critical to the health of our shared ocean home.

The Center values volunteer engagement and inclusivity, and is proud to welcome existing and new volunteers into its 'ohana, or family, to create an even more robust and diverse community of volunteers.

INTERVIEWS

Please contact Media@tmmc.org to arrange interviews.

ABOUT THE MARINE MAMMAL CENTER

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. As a leading contributor to the global body of research and knowledge about marine mammal medicine and ocean health, the Center generates research findings and scientific outputs at volumes comparable to top academic institutions and prides itself on gathering and providing open research data that is free to access, reuse, repurpose and redistribute. The Center's teaching hospital and training programs operate globally with headquarters in Sausalito, CA. The Center has rescued more than 24,000 marine mammals from 600 miles of authorized rescue area along the California coastline and 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](#).