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Endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal Receiving Life-Saving Care at The Marine Mammal Center

(Kailua-Kona, Hawai‘i – May 3, 2023) – The Marine Mammal Center, the world’s largest marine mammal hospital, has admitted an endangered Hawaiian monk seal at the Center’s hospital in Kailua-Kona. The female monk seal is currently in stable condition. The successful rescue of RL68 from Moloka‘i was made possible thanks to support from the community and the Center’s partnership with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) and Hawai‘i Marine Animal Response (HMAR).

“RL68 was in poor body condition for a 4-year-old seal and deteriorating quickly, making intervention necessary for her survival,” says Dr. Sophie Whoriskey, Hawaiian Monk Seal Conservation Veterinarian at The Marine Mammal Center. “For an endangered species like the Hawaiian monk seal, every patient matters. We are grateful to the community for their support and our partners for their rapid response ensuring the best chance for her to return to her ocean home.”

During the seal’s initial critical care period that included an admission exam, the Center’s veterinary team noted that RL68 was alert and actively exploring her rehabilitation pen. Animal care experts are providing her a hearty and calorie-rich diet of sustainably caught herring as well as fluids to help boost her nutritional status and hydration. RL68 is also being treated for gastroenteritis by providing supportive care including antacids and anti-nausea medication.

The Center’s veterinary team took a series of radiographs (X-rays) and performed an ultrasound exam to look for signs of internal trauma or other ailments. Experts also submitted a series of blood samples for diagnostic testing to check for signs of disease, which will take several weeks to process.

A TIMELY RESPONSE TO A SEAL IN NEED

On April 10, a member of the Moloka‘i community alerted NOAA that RL68, a regular on Moloka‘i, had been losing a significant amount of weight and becoming less and less energetic over the past several weeks.

With input from HMAR, NOAA decided that given RL68’s unusually thin body condition and notable behavior change, medical assessment and treatment were in her best interest.

The NOAA and HMAR Moloka‘i team, with support from the community, then jumped into action.

“RL68 is a well-known seal that frequents west side beaches on Moloka‘i. But you never really know where a seal is going to be.” said Todd Yamashita, HMAR’s Moloka‘i Community Programs Manager. “Imagine our surprise that RL68 – the seal we were looking for – was the first seal we spotted the day of the rescue operation! Being directly involved with helping one of our Moloka‘i seals, with the help of Moloka‘i HMAR volunteers who know and love these shorelines, that is the highlight of this experience,” Yamashita said.

The team successfully rescued RL68, and on April 13, USCG transported her to the Center.

Since 2014, the Center has rehabilitated and released 40 monk seals, most of which have been rescued from and returned to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as part of the Center’s partnership with NOAA Fisheries, utilizing resources in the area 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 feet](#) from monk seals and at least 150 feet from monk seal mothers with pups. Report sightings to the Center’s response team via our hotline: on Hawai‘i Island at 808-987-0765 and on Maui at 808-292-2372.

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

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.

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