



## FAQ

### on Designating Additional Habitat for the Hawaiian Monk Seal

#### **Why is the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) revising the listed critical habitat for the Hawaiian monk seal?**

The National Marine Fisheries Service is responding to a petition requesting an expansion of the seal's critical habitat.

#### **Who petitioned NMFS to expand the monk seal's critical habitat?**

KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance, the Center for Biological Diversity, and the Ocean Conservancy. KAHEA is a local nonprofit environmental advocacy organization that works to improve the quality of life for Hawai'i's people by protecting and restoring Hawai'i's unique natural and cultural resources.

#### **Why did KAHEA petition to expand the monk seal's critical habitat?**

Although the monk seal has been listed as endangered since 1977, its population has continued to decline due to the lack of adequate critical habitat for its recovery.

#### **What is the current monk seal population?**

There are fewer than 1200 monk seals in existence, indicating that the monk seal is the most endangered marine mammal in the U.S. and one of the last monk seal species left on Earth.

#### **What kind of expansion of critical habitat did the petitioners request?**

The petitioners requested critical habitat to include areas within the Main Hawaiian Islands (MHI) as well as habitat in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), including Sand Island at Midway and ocean waters to a depth of 500 meters.

#### **What is "critical habitat?"**

Under the Endangered Species Act, when a species -- such as the monk seal -- is listed as endangered or threatened, the habitat of that species legally must be listed as "critical habitat."

#### **Why is listing critical habitat important?**

Listing the critical habitat of a species enables protection of that endangered or threatened species because many species are endangered due to the loss or modification of their habitat. Studies have confirmed that one of the most important factors in determining the fate of a species is whether it has sufficient habitat or not.

#### **How does listing critical habitat change the management of that area?**

Once an area is designated as critical habitat, the Endangered Species Act mandates that the federal government ensure that its actions do not destroy or modify critical habitat. For example, the federal government could not fund the building of a large development or permit a destructive activity in critical habitat.

#### **Will expansion of the monk seal's critical habitat affect the ability to fish in these waters or access the beach?**

No, listing the monk seal's critical habitat will not hinder fishing or beach access. In fact, because listing of critical habitat will protect beaches from development and preserve the natural ecosystems, listing of the seal's habitat will protect these areas for the public. Protecting the beaches and reefs as critical habitat will not restrict public access nor infringe on the rights of those engaging in traditional and customary Native Hawaiian practices.

#### **Why is listing critical habitat to a greater depth in the NWHI waters important for the seal?**

Research has found that the monk seal forages as deep as 500 meters, indicating that habitat at that depth is essential for its survival. Currently, habitat in the NWHI only is protected at a specified distance out from the islands, lacking protection for depth in the ocean.

**Why is listing critical habitat in the MHI important?**

Although the majority of monk seals inhabit the NWHI, habitat loss there is forcing the seals to recolonize the MHI, evidenced by increasing sightings in the MHI. Adequate protections for the monk seal must include habitat where the seals are currently found and likely to go as populations recover. Protection of monk seal habitat both in the ocean and on land is necessary, as the seals live in both habitats.

**Where is the monk seal found?**

The monk seal is endemic to the Hawaiian Islands, meaning that it is found nowhere else in the world.

**What is the cultural significance of the monk seal?**

Designated Hawai'i's state marine mammal, the monk seal is truly a Hawaiian species. The Hawaiian monk seal is endemic to Hawai'i, meaning it is found nowhere else on Earth. Over the centuries, the 'Ilioholoikauaua has been honored in oli (chant) and mele (song) as an 'aumakua (guardian) and a representative of the deities.

**What is the next step in the critical habitat revision process?**

NMFS is commencing its rulemaking process, by which it drafts a proposed rule to revise the monk seal's critical habitat. Upon publishing the proposed rule, NMFS will solicit public comments on it, which will be incorporated in the final rule. The critical habitat will be revised once the final rule is published.

**What can I do to help save the monk seal from extinction?**

Get connected with KAHEA to voice your support for the proposed rule to expand the monk seal's critical habitat. You can sign up for e-mail action alerts at [www.KAHEA.org](http://www.KAHEA.org). By commenting on the proposed rule and further striving to protect the natural and cultural resources of the Hawaiian Islands, KAHEA will continue its work to protect the Hawaiian monk seal and its critical habitat.

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