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Critical Habitat Protection Sought for Hawaiian Monk Seal
Petition Seeks Habitat on Main Hawaiian Islands for Endangered Seals
Seeking Refuge From Sea-level Rise

SAN FRANCISCO— In a formal petition filed today, three conservation groups requested that the federal government protect areas on the main Hawaiian islands as critical habitat for the Hawaiian monk seal under the Endangered Species Act. As monk seal populations plummet on the northwestern Hawaiian islands, the main islands are playing an increasingly important role in the conservation of the species.

Today's petition, filed by the Center for Biological Diversity, KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance, and Ocean Conservancy, seeks to have beaches and surrounding waters on the main Hawaiian islands designated as critical habitat to better protect the monk seal. Currently, the species has critical habitat designated only on the northwestern islands.

"Habitat in the main Hawaiian islands is essential to the survival of the monk seals," said Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity and author of the petition. "Critical habitat protection could be the best chance of recovery for these struggling seals."

The Hawaiian monk seal is one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world. Since the 1950s its population has plummeted and will likely drop below 1,000 animals within a few years. The seals primarily inhabit the northwestern Hawaiian islands — a chain of small islands and atolls northwest of the main islands — where monk seals are dying of starvation, emaciated and weak. Pups have only about a one-in-five chance of surviving to adulthood. Other threats include drowning in abandoned fishing gear, shark predation, and disease.

Hawaiian monk seals are increasingly populating the main islands, where they are giving birth to healthy pups. For the past decade, the number of Hawaiian monk seal births has increased each year on the main islands, and the population of seals is growing steadily; the seals are in better condition than those in the northwestern islands. This indicates more food availability and a better chance of survival. But monk seals on the main islands are threatened by disturbance, development, disease, and entanglement in fishing gear.

“Designating critical habitat in the main Hawaiian islands would protect against federal actions that could threaten monk seal survival. If we don’t act soon we stand to lose forever this treasured part of Hawai’i’s natural heritage,” said Vicki Cornish of Ocean Conservancy. “Preventing the extinction of the Hawaiian monk seal needs to become a national priority.”

Global warming is also an overarching threat to the survival of Hawaiian monk seals. Already, important pupping beaches have been lost due to sea-level rise and erosion, and the northwestern islands will largely disappear under predicted levels of sea-level rise since they are elevated only a few meters above sea level. The higher-elevation main islands are less vulnerable to sea-level rise.

“The Hawaiian monk seal has little hope of survival if we as a society do not rapidly address global warming. We need to start taking inevitable sea-level rise into account when managing wildlife habitat,” said Sakashita. “The main Hawaiian islands will provide a refuge for monk seals whose habitat in the northwestern islands will be lost due to sea-level rise.”

Hawaiian monk seals are one of three species of monk seals. The Mediterranean monk seal is also critically endangered, while the Caribbean monk seal, which has not been seen in half a century, was recently declared extinct.

"Saving the Hawaiian monk seal is not just about saving a species, but perpetuating the unique Hawaiian culture of which it is a part," said Marti Townsend, Program Director at KAHEA. "We cannot afford the extinction of a creature so sacred to indigenous Hawaiian culture and endemic to these islands. And we cannot expect to save this species without engaging in the hard task of designating additional critical habitat."

In passing the Endangered Species Act, Congress emphasized the importance of critical habitat, stating that “the ultimate effectiveness of the Endangered Species Act will depend on the designation of critical habitat.” Recent studies have shown that species with critical habitat are twice as likely to be recovering as species without it.

The Endangered Species Act requires that the government respond to the petition within 90 days. A copy of the petition is available at www.biologicaldiversity.org

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The Center for Biological Diversity is a nonprofit conservation organization with more than 180,000 members and online activists dedicated to protecting endangered species and wild places. www.biologicaldiversity.org

KAHEA is a community-based organization working to improve the quality of life for Hawai'i's people and future generations through the revitalization and protection of Hawai'i's unique natural and cultural resources. We advocate for the proper stewardship of our resources and for social responsibility by promoting multi-cultural understanding and environmental justice. www.kahea.org

*Ocean Conservancy is the world's foremost advocate for the oceans. Through science-based advocacy, research, and public education, we inform, inspire and empower people to speak and act for the oceans. Ocean Conservancy is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has offices in New England, Florida, the Caribbean, the Gulf of Mexico, and California with support from more than half a million members and volunteers.
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