

Who Would Kill a Monk Seal?

Peter Bohler for The New York Times



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By Jon Mooallem

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The Hawaiian monk seal has wiry whiskers and the deep, round eyes of an apologetic child. The animals will eat a variety of fish and shellfish, or turn over rocks for eel and octopus, then haul out on the beach and lie there most of the day, digesting. On the south side of Kauai one afternoon, I saw one sneeze in its sleep: its convex body shuddered, then spilled again over the sand the way a raw, boneless chicken breast will settle on a cutting board. The seals can grow to seven feet long and weigh 450 pounds. They are adorable, but also a little gross: the Zach Galifianakis of marine mammals.

Monk seals are easy targets. After the Polynesians landed in Hawaii, about 1,500 years ago, the animals mostly vanished, slaughtered for meat or oil or

scared off by the settlers' dogs. But the species quietly survived in the Leeward Islands, northwest of the main Hawaiian chain — a remote archipelago, including Laysan Island, Midway and French Frigate Shoals, which, for the most part, only Victorian guano barons and the military have seen fit to settle. There are now about 900 monk seals in the Leewards, and the population has been shrinking for 25 years, making the seal among the world's most imperiled marine mammals. The monk seal was designated an endangered species in 1976. Around that time, however, a few monk seals began trekking back into the main Hawaiian Islands — “the mains” — and started having pups. These pioneers came on their own, oblivious to the sprawling federal project just getting under way to help them. Even now, recovering the species is projected to cost \$378 million and take 54 years.

As monk seals spread through the mains and flourished there, they became tourist attractions and entourage-encircled celebrities. Now when a seal appears on a busy beach, volunteers with the federal government's “Monk Seal Response Network” hustle out with stakes and fluorescent tape to erect an exclusionary “S.P.Z.” around the snoozing animal — a “seal protection zone.” Then they stand watch in the heat for hours to keep it from being disrupted while beachgoers gush and point.

But the seals' appearance has not been universally appreciated. The animals have been met by many islanders with a convoluted mix of resentment and spite. This fury has led to what the government is calling a string of “suspicious deaths.” But spend a little time in Hawaii, and you come to recognize these deaths for what they are — something loaded and forbidding. A word that came to my mind was “assassination.”

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The most recent wave of Hawaiian-monk-seal murders began on the island of Molokai in November 2011. An 8-year-old male seal was found slain on a secluded beach. A month later, the body of a female, not yet 2 years old, turned up in the same area. Then, in early January, a third victim was found on Kauai. The government tries to keep the details of such killings secret, though it is known that some monk seals have been beaten to death and some have been shot. (In 2009, on Kauai, a man was charged with shooting a female seal twice with a .22; one round lodged in the fetus she was carrying.) In the incident on Kauai last January, the killer was said to have left a “suspicious object” lodged in the animal’s head.

Killing an endangered species in Hawaii is both a state and federal offense. Quickly, the State of Hawaii and the Humane Society of the United States put up a reward for information. “We’re all in agreement that somebody knows who did this,” one Humane Society official told me. The islands are close-knit but also loyal, particularly the native Hawaiian communities. In January, when I met with the state wildlife agency’s chief law-enforcement officer for Kauai — a man named Bully Mission — he confessed that, after a year, Kauai’s tip line hadn’t received a single call. In fact, there was still a reward out from a seal killing in 2009.

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A quick aside about Bully Mission: I went to Hawaii thinking I’d write a straight-up police procedural — you know, “CSI: Monk Seal.” When I heard that Kauai’s top wildlife cop was named Bully Mission, I figured I’d found my hard-boiled protagonist. But for one thing, Bully Mission isn’t anything like the detectives on TV. He’s a small, wide-smiling man, who seems to inner-tube through life on currents of joy and amusement. (His real name is Francis.) Wildlife crime-solving doesn’t fit the network-drama formula,

either. The wilderness is a big, unwatched place. The ocean is a violent environment. Sometimes it's tough even to determine a cause of death. (A seal with skull fractures may have been beaten, or it may have died miles out at sea of natural causes, then knocked around in the surf.) When your victim is a seal, one federal agent points out, "you can't interview the seal; you can't interview its friends." Often, you can only pile up a reward and wait.

And so, as the deaths kept coming after that initial murder on Molokai, environmental groups chipped in more money, bringing the total reward to \$30,000, or \$10,000 per seal. Then, in April 2012, a fourth seal was killed on the east side of Kauai. This particular seal was well known in the neighborhood; it frequented an inlet under a scenic walking path. Locals nicknamed it Noho, Hawaiian for "homebody."

Mary Frances Miyashiro, a retired teacher and social worker who patrols that coastline as a volunteer monk-seal responder, arrived on the scene first. She sat with Noho's body for an hour, waiting for others to come and heft the seal into an insulated body bag so it could be driven into town for a necropsy, or animal autopsy. "My heart sank," Miyashiro told me. "I didn't know what to do with those feelings, so I picked up trash." It felt hopeless, like the killings might go on forever.

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Two days later, a uniformed law-enforcement officer from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the federal agency

responsible for monk seals, flew to Kauai from Honolulu to open the U.S. government's investigation. This officer's name was Paul Newman.

Newman went to the crime scene — the beach — and photographed whatever seemed notable. Not much, really. There was one lead — someone had overheard a man badmouthing the monk seal — but it went nowhere. So that night, Newman hopped a commercial flight back to Honolulu. He had a cooler with him, packed with ice, sealed with official tape. Inside was Noho's wounded head. The head was the only evidence.

Volunteers and tourists observe a monk seal (RK31) resting within a seal protection zone on Poipu Beach, in Kauai.
Peter Bohler for The New York Times



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The reward ticked up to \$40,000.

We live in a country, and an age, with extraordinary empathy for endangered species. We also live at a time when alarming numbers of protected animals are being shot in the head, cudged to death or worse.

In North Carolina, for example, hundreds of brown pelicans have recently

been washing ashore dead with broken wings. The birds, nearly wiped out by DDT in the 1970s, are now plentiful and often become semi-tame; they're known to land on fishing boats and swipe at the catch. One theory is that irritated fishermen are simply reaching out and cracking their wings in half with their hands. In March, in Florida, someone shoved a pelican's head through a beer can.

Around the country, at any given time, small towers of reward money sit waiting for whistle-blowers to come forward. This winter four bald eagles were gunned down and left floating in a Washington lake (reward: \$20,250); three were shot in Mississippi (\$7,500); and two in Arkansas (\$3,500). Someone drove through a flock of dunlins — brittle-legged little shorebirds — on a beach in Washington, killing 93 of them (\$5,500). In Arizona, a javelina, a piglike mammal, was shot and dragged down a street with an extension cord strung through its mouth (\$500), and in North Carolina, 8 of only 100 red wolves left in the wild were shot within a few weeks around Christmas (\$2,500). Seven dolphins died suspiciously on the Gulf Coast last year; one was found with a screwdriver in its head (\$10,000). Sometimes, these incidents are just “thrill kills” — fits of ugliness without logic or meaning. But often they read as retaliation, a disturbing corollary to how successful the conservation of those animals has been.

Since the passage of the Endangered Species Act 40 years ago, so much wildlife conservation has been defensive at its core, striving only to keep animals from disappearing forever. But now that we've recovered many of those species, we don't quite know how to coexist with them. We suddenly remember why many of us didn't want them around in the first place. Gray wolves, sandhill cranes, sea otters: species like these, once nearly exterminated, are now rising up to cause ranchers, farmers and fishermen some of the same frustrations all over again. These animals can feel like illegitimate parts of the landscape to people who, for generations, have lived without any of them around — for whom their absence seems, in a

word, *natural*. As Holly Doremus, an environmental legal scholar at the University of California, Berkeley, writes, America has saved so much without ever asking “how much wild nature society needs, and how much society can accept.”

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The monk seal is not one of these success stories. The species, as a whole, is still slipping toward extinction. But the situation in Hawaii follows the same script: there used to be zero monk seals living around the main Hawaiian islands; there are now between 150 and 200. And I heard story after story from fishermen about seals stealing fish from their nets or hooks, or lurking at favorite fishing spots and scaring away everything else. A lot of fishing in Hawaii is done for subsistence — a way for working-class people to eat better food than they can afford to buy. The monk seals are perceived as direct competition, or at least an unnecessary inconvenience. “They’re troublemakers,” a young spear fisherman told me one morning at Kauai’s Port Allen pier.

Also, as often happens with endangered species, many of the people asked to coexist with the monk seal see the animal less as an autonomous wild creature than as an extension of the government working to save it. There has been frustration with the federal government among fishermen and other “ocean users” in Hawaii since at least 2006, when President George W. Bush turned the water around the Leewards into the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, barring a small

number of fishermen who had permits to work there from 140,000 square miles of the Pacific, an area larger than all of America's national parks combined. Now various agencies are bandying about so many other proposals — to protect corals, humpback whales, sea turtles — that several people I met on Kauai seemed to be making second careers of attending the government's informational meetings to keep watch over their rights. It's unclear if these proposals might lead to new fishing regulations, but the sheer volume of environmental strategizing, and the bureaucrats' sometimes inelegant ways of communicating their plans, have led some people to presume that it's all one big, aquatic land grab. A commercial fisherman named John Hurd told me that he believed the feds wanted to make the ocean "a fishbowl." "Divers can't go in there, fishermen can't go in there," he said. "It's going to be an aquarium."

That skepticism is compounded for native Hawaiians. After all, they now walk beaches that their families have used for centuries and find tracts of sand literally roped off by NOAA monk-seal responders — men and women who, on Kauai, are almost exclusively white, wealthy retirees from the mainland. (It's these *haole*, as Hawaiians call white outsiders, who have the luxury of standing watch over a sleeping monk seal all day.) Even the idea that a wild animal needs such coddling strikes some locals as absurd. "The seal needs to rest!" one man, Kekane Pa, told me sarcastically. "The seal needs to rest because it's been swimming in the water."

Pa is 49 years old and gigantic, with a voice that's somehow both hoarse and totally overpowering. He'd picked me up at my hotel, found a nice spot to park his truck at Waimea Beach and proceeded to shout his side of the story at me for nearly two hours, popping a Heineken at one point and rolling down his window whenever he fogged the windshield.

Pa works construction and is also the speaker of the house of the Reinstated Hawaiian Government, a grass-roots shadow government trying to reclaim Hawaii from the United States, which, it maintains, annexed the islands unlawfully in 1898. Like others I met, Pa saw the monk-seal

controversy within this historical context. He brought documents to show me and delivered a scathing people's history of the islands, from the overthrow of the Kingdom of Hawaii in 1893 to the "Apology Resolution" signed by President Clinton in 1993. He felt the same imperial indifference coming from the government now: Hawaiians are second-class citizens, he said; the tourists come first. Now Hawaiians were being skipped over again — for a seal. "There's issues here that have never been resolved since the time they stole Hawaii," Pa told me.

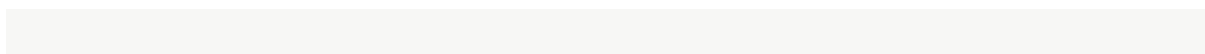
He shouted all of this with a mix of exasperation and righteousness; his eyes never stopped saying, *Can you even believe this is happening?* He was asking for recognition for his people — these living, breathing afterthoughts that so-called civilization had long ago pushed aside. It was the same cry the monk seal, or any endangered species, might make if it had a voice. And yet the seal was now getting all the help and money it needed without ever having to ask.

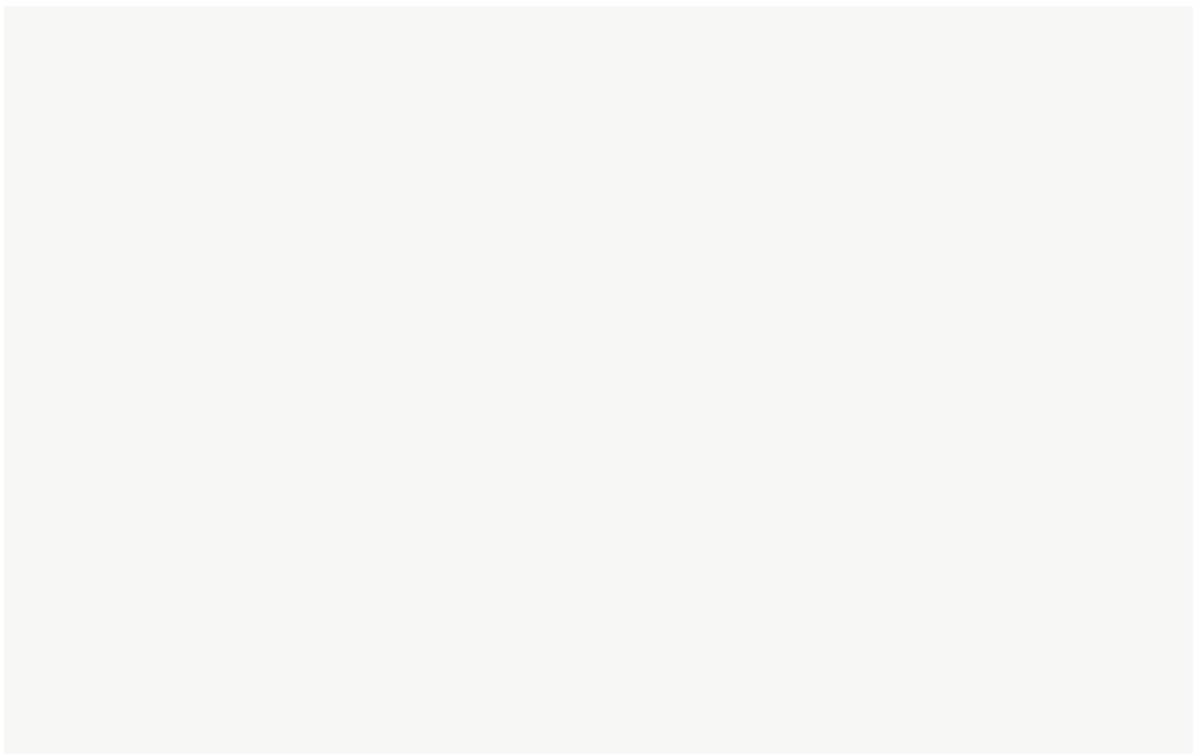
I asked Pa if more seals would be killed. "I hope not," he said. "But I can tell you this: it's just starting to heat up, brah."

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As monk seals became more visible in recent years, this umbrage and suspicion stacked up like kindling. Then, in September 2011, when NOAA officials toured the islands to hold a series of public meetings, it ignited.

A monk seal at rest on Poipu Beach on Kauai, Hawaii. Peter Bohler for The New York Times





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A meeting was required by law to hear public comments about NOAA’s new “programmatically environmental-impact statement” for Hawaiian monk seals, or PEIS. As a hundred or so locals arrived at an elementary school on Kauai one Saturday evening, they were offered USB drives loaded with the document. It was 462 pages long, not including appendices.

The PEIS outlined new ideas for helping the monk seal, which, despite how things looked around Kauai, was in a dismal tailspin as a species. Young seals in the Leewards seem to be having trouble getting enough to eat. Pups are being picked off by sharks, which have learned to slither toward them while they’re nursing, in as little as six inches of water. Also, for a long time, there have been more male seals than females on some of the Leewards, and pups had been bitten or drowned by sexually frustrated males trying to get to their mothers, or crushed when those rippling bulls tried to have sex with them instead. Females have been smothered when multiple males tried to mate with them simultaneously in so-called “mobbing” attacks.

The scientists working in the Leewards were trying everything they could to protect the female pups especially — the future breeders. They used wooden shields called “crowding boards” to break up fights, or swatted the belligerent bulls away with palm fronds, or ran down the beach screaming at them. Now the PEIS was proposing an elegant workaround to the problem: NOAA wanted to move a number of young female monk seals out of the Leewards every year and into the friendlier waters around the mains. They would mature there for a few years, then be captured and moved back once they were able to fend for themselves. NOAA called this process “translocation.” Ecologically speaking, the idea made sense; it bordered on ingenious, even. But sociologically — if you focused on Hawaiian people, and not just Hawaiian monk seals — it was hopelessly tone-deaf.

For one thing, many in Hawaii were convinced that, as one attendee put it at the elementary school, the entire “history of the monk seal is based on a lie.” Because the species was eradicated in the mains so long ago, people have lived on Kauai their entire lives without seeing a single monk seal until recently. Traditional Hawaiian knowledge carries great authority on the islands, and in every cranny of the culture where you’d expect to see monk seals, people saw none: no mention of the seals in traditional chants, no wood carvings. People often point out that they don’t even know of a Hawaiian word for the animal. (NOAA believes the ancient word *ilioholoikauaua*, “dog running in rough water,” refers to the seal, though that has been resisted; at one public forum, a man called applying that word to monk seals a “defamation of my language and my culture.”) The logical explanation, for many, was that the seal wasn’t actually native to Hawaii, that the government had brought the animals, in secret, to create jobs for scientists and push its environmentalist agenda. (This conspiracy theory may have grown from a bit of misunderstood truth; in 1994, NOAA brought 21 monk seals to the mains from one Leeward island in an earlier attempt to even out the genders there.) It seemed arrogant for NOAA to announce that it wanted to bring more now.

Another objection was rooted in an equally uncooperative set of coincidences: namely, the situation with the birds. It was Kauai's mayor, Bernard P. Carvalho Jr., who filled me in about the birds. A towering, debonair man in an earth-toned aloha shirt, Carvalho met me in his office to talk monk seals. But it was obvious that, as far as he was concerned, I was asking about the wrong animal. He explained how seabirds called Newell's shearwaters come to Kauai to mate and nest every spring. In the fall, the fledglings leave the nest and become disoriented by bright lights. They will drop from the sky and freeze up. For as long as Carvalho can remember, he said, when you find a dazed shearwater, you simply pick it up and bring it to the firehouse, where it's tucked in a pigeon box and tended to until it recovers.

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The shearwater fledgling season happens to coincide with the high-school football season. One local described how little kids have always raced around the sidelines, under the Friday-night lights, collecting the paralyzed birds. But the Newell's shearwater is a federally protected species. In 2010, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service informed the County of Kauai that each downed shearwater would be considered a violation of federal law. Fines, the mayor was told, could reach \$25,000 per bird. "So that was kind of a big . . . *what?*" he said.

Friday-night football became Friday-afternoon football. Working parents had trouble seeing their kids play, and the island lost one of its central

forms of entertainment. There was anger, incredulity and T-shirts that read “Buck the Firds.” The mayor, a former high-school football star on Kauai, told me: “Friday night is football night. Don’t even go there!” Now, more than two years later, the county was still working with the federal government to retrofit the lights and get in compliance. In part, the mayor explained, this involved keeping track of the relative brightness of the phases of the moon.

There were other birds too, he went on: like the Hawaiian nene goose, which was once within a few dozen birds of extinction. Now many congregate on a golf course next to the airport, where the mayor worries — “God forbid” — that one might bring down a flight. Conservation is important, he said, “but where does it end? How far does it go?”

A version of this question was raised at the elementary-school hearing again and again. As one man put it, “Nowadays, it seems that wildlife has more support than the people.” The government was focused so narrowly on helping monk seals survive an immediate threat, but it wasn’t communicating any cohesive vision of the future. How many monk seals in the water around Kauai would be enough? What would coexistence with that many seals look like? One speaker asked, for example, whether he’d be fined for striking a seal if the animal threatened his little cousins while they were swimming. But the NOAA officials holding the meeting couldn’t answer his question — or anybody’s. There had been town-hall meetings held throughout the year, but federal law required that this hearing be a “listening session” only. The panelists were barred from speaking to anyone who testified. It was meant to be respectful — we’re all ears — but it came off as insulting. (“Silence,” one participant, a construction worker named Kimo Rosa, told me. “Silence!”) And so, one by one, people rose to delineate their conspiracy theories or plead for respect, until a timekeeper flashed a red sign and their three minutes were up.

Near the end of the hearing, a man named Kalani Kapuniaia noted that if the government were here to ask for the community’s input on translocation,

then “from what I gathered over here, you guys, the answer is no. . . . So put [this] down in your notes,” Kapuniaia said. People are getting fed up with the monk seals, and “ they’re going to kill them. Bottom line.”

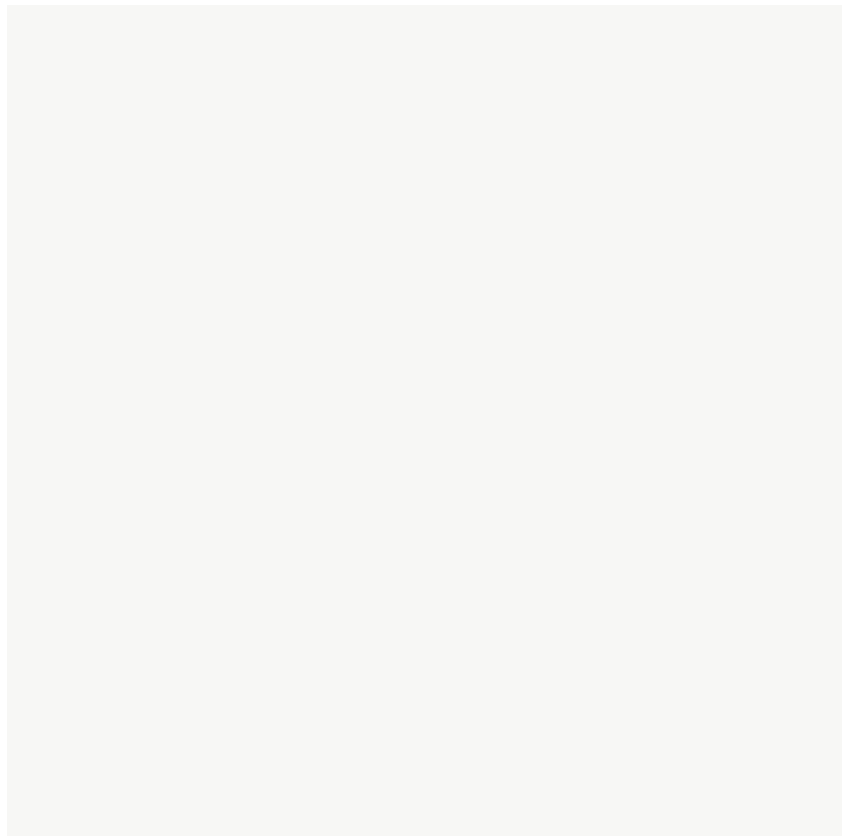
There was applause. All the moderator could do — all she was allowed to do — was say, “Thank you.” Eight weeks later, a beachgoer found the 8-year-old seal slaughtered on the Molokai beach, the first of the four killings that winter.

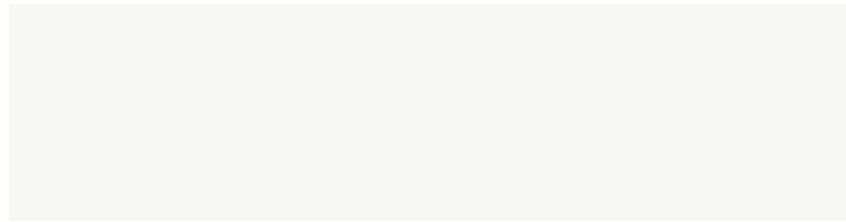
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Many of the monk seals slipping back into the main Hawaiian Islands in the early '70s landed first on the shores of Niihau, the island closest to the Leewards. Niihau is plainly visible from the west coast of Kauai but also, in a sense, completely invisible, since it has been privately owned since 1864, when a family named Sinclair bought the island from King Kamehameha V for \$10,000 in gold.

Walter Ritte, a local activist on Molokai, who believes Hawaiians and monk seals can peacefully coexist.

Peter Bohler for The New York Times





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Niihau is 72 square miles — the size of Brooklyn, roughly, or one and a half San Franciscos. While the 20th century was happening to the other Hawaiian islands, the Robinsons (the Sinclairs' heirs) pugnaciously kept outsiders away from theirs, preserving it, like a diorama, for the family's old-fashioned ranching operation and a small community of natives who still live in a village at one end. Even after a two-way radio was installed on Niihau in 1959, information was still regularly relayed to Kauai by messenger pigeon — when information was relayed at all. Mostly, the Robinsons and the Niihau people wanted to be left alone. An irresistible scrim of secrecy still hangs around the island. In 1957, a journalist seemingly went so far as to crash-land a small airplane on Niihau so he could look around.

Pristine and mostly empty, Niihau has been a perfect gateway for Hawaiian monk seals as they have recolonized their species' ancestral habitat. It's no secret that lately the federal government's recovery effort has been mired in a fair amount of desperation. (In March, NOAA indefinitely postponed the translocation from the Leewards, not because it lacked public support, says Jeff Walters, the agency's monk-seal-recovery coordinator, but because NOAA "needs more time and resources to grow our capacity to better manage and protect the seals already living in the mains before bringing down any new animals, even temporarily.") And so the scientists involved can get a little breathless when they speculate about the fantastic number of monk seals that must be living happily on Niihau. But no one knows for sure: Keith and Bruce Robinson, the aging brothers who, along with their

mother, inherited control of Niihau in 1969, haven't given the government the kind of access or data it would like. Walters described the island as both one of the real "hopes for monk seals in the main Hawaiian islands" and as a giant "black box" at the center of the story.

"What a horrible-looking sow!" Keith Robinson bellowed as a scraggly black hog materialized from the bushes and scampered alongside our truck. Robinson seemed somehow uplifted by its hideousness. It was the jolliest I'd see him all day.

I'd managed to talk Robinson into giving me a tour of his family's island. He is 71 and bracingly direct. He lives on Kauai — neither Robinson brother has ever lived on Niihau for longer than a few months at a time — and within seconds of our meeting there, he handed me a copy of his self-published book, "Approach to Armageddon: One Christian's Speculation About the End of the Age." The cover showed a wasteland of mushroom clouds and twisting pillars of smoke. At the bottom, standing like a solitary figure in a Japanese landscape painting, was an old man in work clothes and a green hard hat, carrying a rifle. The man in the hard hat was Keith Robinson. He was wearing the same outfit, including the hat, when I met him in the doorway of his office.

The Robinson brothers have made Niihau a marginally more open place than it once was. They started allowing a small number of tourists, though they barely advertise, don't run tours on any discernible schedule and permit outsiders to visit only certain parts of the island. Keith Robinson presented himself and his brother as wretchedly cash-poor — he spent the 20-minute helicopter flight over from Kauai badgering the pilot to fly in a straight line, so as not to waste fuel — and the island as a cherished grandparent to whom they're devoted to keeping alive, no matter the cost or aggravation. The Robinsons have been able to afford this largely through partnerships with the U.S. Navy, which operates tracking stations on the island for aircraft and missile testing offshore. The Navy also holds exercises in the channel between Niihau and Kauai — which, Robinson

explained, can be used as a proxy for the Strait of Hormuz, the link between the Persian Gulf and the Arabian Sea, off the coast of Iran. Years ago, the Navy also ran downed-pilot drills on Niihau's interior. A pilot would be tasked with finding his way off Niihau, as if after a crash, while bands of Niihau people pursued him. The Niihau are solidly built and fast; one of the few native women I was able to talk with described how they hunt hogs on the island: by running the animals down on foot and grabbing an ankle. They took to the downed-pilot drills enthusiastically — their only extramural sport. The poor pilots never had a chance, Robinson explained.

We trundled around the northwestern portion of the island, looking for monk seals in a battered, Korean War-era weapons carrier, a kind of truck, with wooden planks for benches. Our chauffeur was a silent, barrel-chested Niihau man. He pushed the truck over the sand, or on primitive dirt trails, while Robinson issued him quick, clipped instructions in Hawaiian. (The Niihau may be the last surviving community of native Hawaiian speakers.) The scenery was spectacular, in an illicit, "Jurassic Park" kind of way. The beaches looked like screen-saver beaches. Every so often, we saw a monk seal and stopped, rising from our seats in the truck to observe the animal doing nothing. Robinson had not been on Niihau for many months, and was disturbed by how few seals we were spotting. "There are no monk seals here!" he kept saying. He blamed fishermen from Kauai who've been turning up to fish Niihau's pristine reefs. He claims these fishermen are disturbing, and even occasionally shooting, the monk seals. I sensed that these "marauders," as Robinson called them, were also an affront to the isolation and privacy that his family has always cherished. Robinson described these Kauai fishermen the way the fishermen described the monk seals: as an invasive species, barging in to threaten the natives' survival.

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“Darn it, this is not good,” he huffed as we crossed another empty beach. “This is a catastrophe. This is disastrous.” His shock and concern were quickly phasing into sulking.

Relatively speaking, Niihau is actually packed with monk seals. At its peak, about a decade ago, the population there may have reached 200 — about a fifth of the world’s current population. Returning from their millennium-long exile in the Leeward Islands, the seals found, in Niihau, a landscape that not only looked remarkably the way it did when they left it behind but that was also governed by two eccentrics willing to make room for them.

It turns out that the Robinson brothers are devout conservationists. “I’m a right-wing extremist,” Keith told me, and this means feeling an obligation to use the earth wisely and replenish it, just as God instructed in the Bible. “If they want to shoot monk seals on the other islands, that’s fine,” he said. “But Bruce and I like having them around.”

For decades, the brothers have done their best to foster and protect the seals on Niihau, organizing the Niihau people to monitor them along the coastline. That is, they’ve cultivated acceptance of the seals among the Niihau people — exactly what NOAA has failed to do elsewhere. Robinson told me that, in the early days, he heard the same grumbling about monk seals from the Niihau people that I encountered on Kauai. “But Bruce and I just said: ‘Look, let’s tolerate these seals. You may have to work a little harder for your fish, but the fish will still be there, and the seals will have a chance.’ ” When I asked how they managed to pull this off, Robinson noted that, for one thing, there truly are more fish to go around on Niihau. But also, he added, “well, we’re the nasty, old feudal landlords.” The Niihau

people are the Robinsons' tenants and their employees. No messy public hearings on his island.

Robinson told me that he would happily host as many more monk seals as NOAA wanted to relocate from the Leewards, as long as he could manage the animals his way. He has no stomach for the tyrannical regulations and egregious spending that he feels the government uses endangered species to justify. As we drove, he laid out his case against America's "eco-Nazis," an epithet he uses tirelessly and, I would learn, without hyperbole.

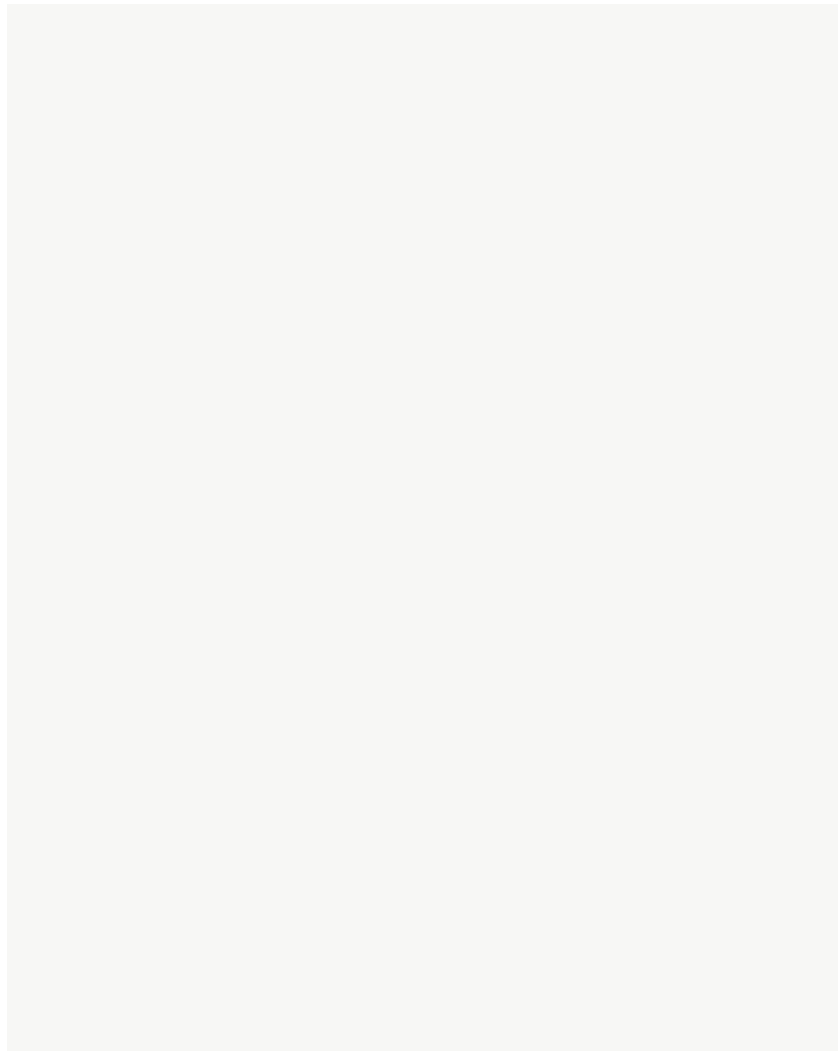
(Robinson later gave me writings outlining his belief that environmentalism is a deliberate conspiracy to install totalitarian government in America while distracting its citizens with cuddly, vanishing animals, just as Hitler's rise to power in Germany was cloaked by nationalism.) But look at Niihau, he said: "We've done all this quietly, on our own, and with our own money. It didn't cost the government a cent." On the other Hawaiian islands, people were sticking it to the government by murdering the seals it was working to save; Robinson was sticking it to the government by actually saving them.

Robinson has always imagined his conservation work as this sort of principled, guerrilla resistance to the eco-Nazi regime. A gifted horticulturist, he started growing many imperiled, native Hawaiian plants on his family's land on Kauai in the 1980s. This included a particular subspecies of *Caesalpinia kavaiensis*, a Hawaiian hardwood, which was coming close to extinction in the wild; Robinson managed to produce a single tree from surviving seeds. But in the mid-'90s, he discovered a draft document from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service expressing the agency's wish to "secure" and "manage" the tree on his land. He jumped to the conclusion that this meant seizure by eminent domain. (John Fay, a former botanist for Fish and Wildlife, told me, "Basically, it was a misunderstanding." Deeper in the document, the agency asserted that Robinson's work should be "supported and assisted.") Robinson called the agency in a rage. He recounted the phone call to me several times, always in

a single, Homeric run-on: “I also stated that if they wanted to take my reserve over, they would probably have to engage in a gun battle with me, and kill me, and I said that coming after the debacle at Ruby Ridge and the debacle at Waco, which had just happened a few months before, if the government’s next heroic exploit was to attack and murder a conservation worker in his own reserve to take over work that the government was too lazy and incompetent to do itself, that might look a little strange to the public.” Seventy-two hours after he hung up the phone, Robinson told me, his *Caesalpinia kavaiensis* tree was dead. The implication was, he killed it. He felt sick about it, he added, but freedom comes first.

The mayor of Kauai, Bernard Carvalho Jr., who wonders if conservationists don’t sometimes go too far.

Peter Bohler for The New York Times



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Now, Robinson explained, he and his brother were being threatened again. With monk seals flourishing in the main Hawaiian islands, environmental groups are pressuring the federal government to designate the water around Kauai and Niihau “critical habitat” for monk seals under the Endangered Species Act. It’s an abstruse legal move that wouldn’t directly affect most fishermen, but would subject the Navy to a review process that could ultimately force it to alter or even abandon its work there. This would cut off the income that has allowed the Robinsons to protect the seals’ habitat in the first place. And so recently, in an uncharacteristic move, the brothers approached NOAA about including Niihau’s coastline and near-shore waters in a national marine sanctuary instead. One of the Robinsons’ central conditions would be to ban the Kauai fishermen. (A NOAA spokesman confirmed that the agency is in discussions with the family but that if the waters around Niihau “are proposed for inclusion [in the sanctuary], NOAA will then embark, with the State of Hawaii, in a public process to consider any regulatory changes or restrictions.” In February, during a trip through the Pacific, the director of NOAA’s National Marine Sanctuaries system, Daniel Basta, visited the Robinsons on Niihau.)

As Robinson explained all this to me on Niihau, his sporadic bleats of indignation and alarm began to sound more nuanced. After all, in his eyes at least, our difficulty finding monk seals was the appalling proof of the damage those Kauai fishermen were doing, of how urgent the sanctuary deal had become. His panic was genuine, but I wondered whether this was why he allowed a journalist on his family’s so-called Forbidden Island in the first place: not to see monk seals, but to *not* see monk seals.

“This place should be crawling with monk seals!” Robinson said as we got out to explore one bluff. “Something’s awfully wrong here. Awfully wrong.”

Dana Rosendal, the pilot for the family’s helicopter company, was unfazed.

We'd covered only a quarter of the island, he told Robinson, and we'd already seen 10 seals.

"Dana," Robinson cut in, "we've only seen five or six, plus one lousy turtle."

Rosendal ticked off each sighting, then counted up his fingers. Ten, exactly.

"Well, whoop dee do!" Robinson shot back. "Ten seals!" Then he stepped into the shallow tide, in his work boots and hard hat, and walked down the beach by himself. Suddenly, his island must have felt too crowded.

I spent my last morning in Hawaii at a coffee shop on Molokai, waiting for an anonymous monk-seal murderer to show up, or not show up, for an interview.

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Molokai is the small island just to the west of Maui. It's a poor and rural place, defiantly resistant to large-scale tourism, with a single hotel and a higher percentage of native Hawaiians than any other island except Niihau. Monk-seal politics have been particularly fierce on Molokai, where unemployment is high and the rights of subsistence fishermen feel even more sacred. A local activist, Walter Ritte, described how elders on Molokai have fostered a feeling among the island's youth that monk seals are not actually Hawaiian and should be gotten rid of.

I met Ritte the previous week in Honolulu, where he was spending the day. He is soft-spoken and slight with a knotty beard and a fearsome reputation

as an agitator. (Lately, he has been battling Monsanto, which grows genetically modified crops on Molokai.) On the monk-seal issue, however, Ritte has tried to be a voice of tolerance for the seals — a native voice that can carry that message with more credibility than the government. Everyone knows him as “Uncle” Walter, a Hawaiian term of respect.

In Honolulu, Ritte told me that he knew who killed the first of the four monk seals in 2011 — the big male on Molokai’s southwestern shore. When he heard the news, he said, he made a point of finding out — Ritte commands that sort of unofficial mayoral power on Molokai — and went to speak with the person. By the time they were done talking, he said, “I don’t think that person was really happy with what they did. The remorse was really, really deep.”

I kept after Ritte while I was on Kauai the following week. The people I was meeting there were so angry and entrenched. It was comforting to know that at least one person — the Kid, as Ritte referred to him — seemed to have changed his mind on the issue. Eventually, Ritte called to say that the Kid agreed to have breakfast with me the following morning on Molokai. I flew over. But minutes before our meeting, the Kid called Ritte to back out.

I told Ritte I’d be at Coffees of Hawaii, reading a book, if the Kid changed his mind. Three hours later, for reasons I couldn’t have imagined, he did.





In Hawaii, at least 4 endangered monk seals have been found violently murdered since the end of 2011.

The Kid was nothing like what I expected. He's in his mid-30s but projected such bashfulness that he seemed 10 or 15 years younger. He'd asked to meet on the porch of a more private location and, with Ritte looking on for support, he explained how, one day shortly after the incident, Uncle Walter simply knocked on his door unannounced and said, "I want to talk to you about the seal."

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The Kid had mustered an enthusiastic defense. He told Ritte that he believed what the elders said: that monk seals didn't belong here and were upsetting the natural balance Hawaiians depended on. Ritte listened, then told him about his first experience with monk seals — back in 2006, while Ritte was campaigning to stop a developer from building luxury housing on a remote Molokai coastline called Laau Point. Laau Point is a prime fishing and hunting ground, and Ritte and his troops believed that losing access to it would degrade Hawaiians' ability to provide for themselves, driving them and their traditions even closer to extinction. Hundreds of protesters occupied the point for three months, sleeping on the beach. And there, in the quiet, monk seals began to appear on the sand — the first that some protesters had ever seen. Ritte told me that, sleeping side by side —

Hawaiians and Hawaiian monk seals — it was just so clear to him: “I was there for survival, and the seals were there for the same reason. I saw myself in the seals.”

“Uncle Walt is a well-respected man,” the Kid now said. Ritte’s appearance on his doorstep that day was itself a rebuke. So the Kid kept listening as Ritte explained that monk seals had actually lived in Hawaii long before Hawaiians did, and that Hawaiians — a people who know displacement and disregard — should feel kinship with the animals, rather than resentment. The seal was here first, and we have no right to push it out, Ritte told him. This hit the Kid hard; he still sounded crushed under the weight of this truth: “I actually killed another Hawaiian,” he told me.

Outside the Kid’s house that day, Ritte hadn’t actually asked him for any details. He didn’t need to hear: the two sides of the monk-seal debate had become so predictable that it was easy for him to fill in the rest. When we first met, Ritte told me that the Kid was presumably “doing what the elders had said. It was like killing a mongoose that ate his mother’s chickens. I mean, he thought nothing of it.” And now, I caught myself making the same assumptions. Until I asked.

The Kid seemed relieved to walk me through the story. He and his friends had hiked out to fish but kept finding monk seals at all their favorite spots. Finally, at one location, they encountered the 8-year-old bull, a huge animal with a deformed jaw, sprawled out as though it were waiting for them. One of the Kid’s friends was fuming by now — they’d walked so far — and he goaded the Kid to do something. “I guess it was out of anger, frustration,” the Kid told me, “and kind of like peer pressure.” In retrospect, so much about what happened next surprised him: how impulsively he reached for a rock and threw it; how, though he only intended to scare the animal off and was standing a fair distance away, the rock somehow struck the seal squarely in the head, and some force inside the monk seal instantaneously shut off.

His friends clammed up. The Kid was the smallest, gentlest guy in the group, and “that was the first time I ever did something like that,” he said. At first, they assumed he only knocked the animal out. But eventually it sank in, and they steeled themselves and turned to walk home. “Already,” the Kid told me, “it was eating me up.”

Later, a federal investigator told me that key details of the Kid’s story were consistent with the necropsy report. (“The animal was hit on the head,” he said. “It was a blunt trauma to the head.”) A government scientist familiar with the case was more circumspect; he explained that it would be possible to kill a resting monk seal by throwing a very heavy rock — maybe on impact, or more likely by causing internal bleeding — but extremely difficult. Frankly, I don’t know what happened. The Kid seemed so vulnerable that I believed his story on the spot. I’ve had moments of skepticism since then — moments when I’ve wondered if, say, the Kid hadn’t actually stood over the animal and dropped a 20-pound boulder on its head, and was now trying to distance himself from that act. But either way, he acted impulsively and now regretted what he had done.

It was only a few weeks after the incident that the second murdered monk seal was found on Molokai. “Then after the second one,” the Kid said, “they had the one on Kauai, and I was thinking like, Oh, no, what did I start? Even Uncle Walter told me that it might have set off some kind of chain reaction.” The Kid had never really been a churchgoer, he said, but recently his wife decided they ought to start. And a couple of weeks ago, he prayed about the monk seal for the first time. “I kind of just prayed and asked for forgiveness,” he explained. He wanted to come clean but worried his family would suffer if he did. “I know what I had done was wrong, and I just basically asked Him for guidance,” he said — a safe way to confess. “And lo and behold,” the Kid told me, “here you are.”

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It was sad — every bit of it, and in so many freakish ways. NOAA was focused on saving an endangered species by repairing the ecology around it. But more and more, the success of conservation projects relies on a shadow ecology of human emotion and perception, variables that do not operate in any scientifically predictable way. Looking back, I was astonished by how the pieces just kept snapping together, and stubbornly locking in place, in exactly the worst way: how, at the public hearings, the government’s attempts to show respect and empathy were read as just more imperiousness; how reasonable the conspiracy theory about the monk seal’s origins actually seemed in context; how the one safe place the monk seals *had* found was under erratic Robinsonian rule. There was so much terrible serendipity. The story of monk seals was pocked with black swans.

And now, here was the Kid: not the angry, musclebound fisherman that environmentalists tended to imagine when they pictured the monk-seal killers — not even really a fisherman, it turned out. He’d gone fishing only twice that year, and the second time, when his companion started threatening a monk seal in the vicinity, the Kid said that he de-escalated the situation by telling his friend that NOAA now implanted tiny security cameras in the animals’ eyes and would be watching them. He flashed a hang-loose sign at the seal’s eyes and urged his friend to do the same — to tell the bureaucrats hi. “You should have seen the face on that one guy,” he told me on the porch. “So gullible.” Then he paused a second and said, “I wish I could be there for everybody, and tell them the same thing.”

The Kid wasn’t technically a kid at all, and yet what he’d described felt like

a classic coming-of-age story — something out of a novel you’d read in middle school about a boy who, in a moment of recklessness, shoots a robin with his BB gun to impress his friends, then weeps over the corpse. Except it wasn’t a robin; it was a federally endangered Hawaiian monk seal, and so, the Kid worried, his transgression had set off a killing spree. In fact, the night before we met on Molokai, news broke that a 7-month-old female seal had been found speared on an island off Oahu. It survived, and in a photograph that NOAA released, the animal stared into the camera with narrowing eyes, one prong of the metal fishing implement still stuck through her forehead. She looked like a guileless horse that had been ridden into battle and lanced.

In Hawaii, so many circumstances had knotted together to snare this species. In a way, they snared the Kid too. But he wouldn’t allow himself to see it that way. At one point, he mentioned again that he only wanted to scare the monk seal away, not kill it, and I tried to say something sympathetic, lamenting his bad luck. He was quick to correct me: “Mostly, bad decision,” he said. “*Stupid* decision. You got to accept what you did.”

[Jon Mooallem](#) is the author of “[Wild Ones](#),” a book about people and wild animals in America, out next week.

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