

Splash!

by Bob Duerr



NOAA Kills Monk Seal

■ "A Letter to the Public on the Loss of a Seal" was written on October 2, 2015, by NOAA's Dr. Charles Littnan, lead scientist of the Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program.

Dr. Littnan wrote, "I am sorry to announce that a seal died during a routine procedure while the Hawaiian Monk Seal Research Program (HMSRP) was conducting research and recovery work in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. On September 17, the team captured a 13-year-old adult male monk seal as part of our general health assessment research at Laysan Island."

According to Dr. Littnan, monk seal scientists use a variety of drugs "to sedate or, in some cases, anesthetize seals when they are being handled. For monk seals we tend to use diazepam (a.k.a. Valium)." Drugs allow seals to relax in the net during capture and sometimes the seals will fall asleep.

"Even with the mildest of sedatives seals can go into 'dive response' when sedated. This state mimics the physiological response that occurs when seals dive: the heart rate decreases and breathing can stop. This is precisely what happened on that morning at Laysan," said Dr. Littnan.

"When the team became aware that the seal was becoming unresponsive, steps were taken to reverse the drugs, stimulate the seal with physical touch and drugs, and intubate to assist with breathing. This is a situation that the team is trained for, but despite our best efforts we were unsuccessful in reviving the seal," he said.

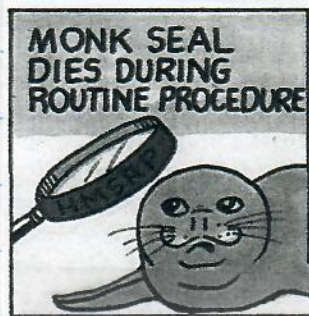
Kaua'i's Greg Holzman has some questions about the statistics of seal handling. "NOAA killed another monk seal and has tried to justify this with a statistic that they have only had five deaths in 8,200 monk seal 'handlings.'" According to Greg, NOAA started these handlings in 1982, or "about 33 years" ago. Greg did the math: "Thirty-three years is 12,045 days. Twelve thousand days divided by 8,200 is 0.68 'handlings' a day for 33 years. In 1982 monk seals began showing up on Kaua'i and Ni'ihau from NWHI," Greg stated. "Monk seals have been declining for years in NWHI. There have been five seal deaths. . . . How many untold traumatic events on rare monk seals?"

Greg wondered if seal handling has contributed to the seal population decline. He also asked, does handling traumatize the monk seals enough to see them migrating toward Kaua'i?

"Seals drugged and traumatized. . . . Is this too much handling?" Greg pondered.

For more, Google NOAA's "Letter to the Public on the Loss of a Monk Seal," or see <http://www.pifsc.noaa.gov/news>.

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