

Environment

# Endangered Monk Seal Died Of Gunshot Wound To The Head, Authorities Say

It was at least the third monk seal to be intentionally killed by humans this year on Molokai, government officials said.



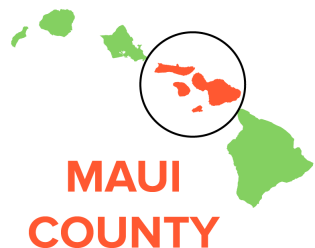
By Marcel Honore □ □ □ / December 21, 2021

□ Reading time: 3 minutes.



Federal and state authorities announced Tuesday that the female monk seal found dead near Molokai’s Kawela Stream on Sept. 10 was killed by a bullet wound to the head – and they’re seeking the public’s help to find who killed her.

That seal, known as L11, was about a year old and known for her playful and curious nature, one local conservationist said. She was also one of at least three of the critically endangered animals that were intentionally killed by humans on Molokai in 2021, according to the authorities.



“Make no mistake,” the killings of L11 and two other monk seals by blunt-force trauma in April were “evil, despicable acts perpetrated against an endangered animal in its own natural habitat,” said Jason Redulla, chief of the state’s Division of Conservation and Resource Enforcement.

“Someone has information whether they know it or not,” he added.

Courtesy: NOAA/2021



The monk seal known as L11, an approximately 1-year-old female, was killed in September on Molokai when someone shot her in the head. Authorities are seeking help from the public to find who killed her.

In all, nine of the endangered animals were found dead on the Friendly Isle this year, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. A 10th died in May 2020. Officials deemed the cause of death for five of those seals on Molokai inconclusive because their carcasses were either too badly decomposed when found or were swept out to sea.

Nonetheless, NOAA officials say they suspect several of the seals in those inconclusive cases were intentionally killed by humans as well, and the investigations remain open.

Since 2009, some 15 monk seals were confirmed to have been killed intentionally by humans in Hawaii, all on the islands of Molokai and Kauai, according to Angela Amlin, the Hawaiian monk seal recovery coordinator with NOAA's National Marine Fisheries Service.

In recent years [at least four seals have died from gunshots](#) — including a pregnant female, according to a NOAA fact sheet.

It's unclear whether there's been an increase in the intentional killings in recent years because authorities have also received more alerts on monk seals from a growing number of volunteer networks and from a NOAA statewide hotline, Amlin said Tuesday.

The animals, which are endemic to Hawaii, also face peril from toxoplasmosis, a disease that originates in cat feces, and from fishing hooks and nets. There have been 15 confirmed monk seal deaths from toxoplasmosis alone since 2001 “and probably many more,” Amlin added.

## **Hawaiian Monk Seal Deaths on Molokai**

Data from 1/1/2020 - 12/13/2021

Source: [National Oceanic & Atmospheric Administration](#)

Overall there are [about 1,400 monk seals](#) across the Hawaiian archipelago, including some 300 to 350 of them in the main islands.

Their numbers in the wild have seen some modest gains in recent years – about 2% annual growth between 2013 and 2019. Amlin said data collection on the species wasn't as sharp in 2020 due to Covid-19, and the data for 2021 isn't yet available.

Still, a NOAA press release on Tuesday called the intentional killings of the animals “devastating to the recovery of this population.”

“We are committed to engaging with partners and community members to exchange information and support protection of natural resources and cultural traditions on Molokai,” the release added.

Todd Yamashita, Molokai operations manager for the nonprofit [Hawaii Marine Animal Response](#), said via text Tuesday that there's been active “disinformation” campaigns on the island to convince locals that seals are “stealing” their fish and that they have the right to stop any animal that gets in the way of that.

The seals consume relatively small amounts of food in a given area and the majority of their hunting occurs far offshore, Yamashita said. “The idea that seals are taking fish off our table is just as misplaced as saying that sharks are eating all the fish in the ocean. It's simply untrue.”

Courtesy: Todd Yamashita/2021



The 1-year-old Hawaiian monk seal known as L11 was found dead on Molokai in September near the mouth of the Kawela river.

Amlin added that the intentional killings “are not broadly reflective of the Molokai and Kauai communities” that have deep-rooted traditions of stewardship.

Molokai is home to roughly 70 monk seals and sees at least a dozen seal births each year -- the most of any of the Main Hawaiian Islands, according to Yamashita.

Redulla said that the investigations into monk seal killings are especially difficult because the animals “really don’t have any way to tell us how they got killed except for the evidence that’s found at the scene.”

NOAA thanked [Hawaii Marine Animal Response](#), which aims to rescue and protect monk seals, and state authorities for recovering L11’s carcass quickly and in sufficient condition to determine what killed her. A NOAA release says a bullet fragment was

found in association with evidence of severe, lethal trauma. NOAA is awaiting test results to see if L11 had any diseases, but does not expect the results to change.

Killing monk seals is a state and federal crime with a punishment of up to five years in prison under state law alone, Redulla said.

Authorities encouraged anyone with information about the deaths of monk seals to contact NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement hotline at 800-853-1964 or the DOCARE hotline at 808-643-DLNR (3567). They can also use the [DLNRTip](#) app on their phones.

"This is a very sad and difficult time -- to know that one of our people here on Molokai would choose to hurt these critically endangered animals," said Yamashita, a fourth-generation resident of the rural island.

*Civil Beat reporter Brittany Lyte contributed to this story.*

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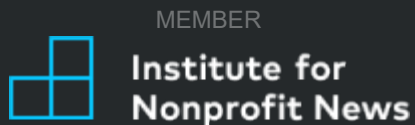


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