

# Don't love monk seals to death—it's the law

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I was just getting out of bed recently when my telephone rang. "Sorry to call so early," my upstairs neighbor said. "But there's a monk seal on our beach. We thought you would know what to do."

I hurried to the lanai. Sure enough, right there on the beach fronting our Waiialua apartment building lay an adult monk seal, basking in the warm morning sun. Oh lucky day, I thought, as I quickly dressed, then bolted downstairs.

But what I initially perceived as a blessing turned into a nightmare: People were rushing to the endangered animal like it was a costumed character from Disneyland.

"Johnny! Sally!" yelled a woman who shocked me by striding right up to the resting creature. "Come see the seal on the beach!"

The seal lifted her head and roared.

"Shhhhh," several of us said. "Get back."

"Why?" she said, indignantly. The seal bellowed again.

"It's an endangered species," I said. "There are only about 1,500 of these seals left in the world."

The woman stared at the animal. "Oh, in California, they're everywhere. JOHNNY! SALLY!" she bellowed. "GET OVER HERE. I WANT YOU TO SEE THIS!" The children came running. "This is a rare seal," she explained to the kids. "Go over and stand by it so I can take your picture."

"Not!" said those of us who knew better. "It's against the law to get so close," one neighbor explained, losing patience. "So back off."

The woman stood her ground, jutting her chin. "Just who do you think you are, ordering us around like that?"

I sighed, standing up. "We're the people who are calling the police."

AND so the day went. I called the National Marine Fisheries Service, which sent an enforcement officer. But he was the only person covering the entire island and could not stay. He had to post the beach at Makaha where another seal lay, plus other duties.

He left us with a sign and a warning: "Tell people it's a federal offense to get within 100 feet of this animal or to alter its behavior in any way. The fine is \$20,000. Call me if you have any trouble."

OK. But who would inform people? Even if I sat down there all day, many people became belligerent, even hostile, at being told what they could and could not do on a public beach.

The answer came when a male



## OCEAN WATCH

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neighbor brought his beach chair and settled near the sign for the entire day. Few were bold enough to challenge this big, burly man — but still, it wasn't an easy job.

I visited the volunteer guardian several times that afternoon. He was getting more and more sunburned and the semicircle of curious onlookers was growing. "How's it going?" I asked.

A nearby observer interrupted. "Someone should get a bucket and throw some water on this seal — look how dry it's getting."

"Don't even think about it," the guard growled. "This seal is TRYING to get dry." I gaped at the noisy, milling crowd, amazed that the animal was here at all.

WHEN I returned late that afternoon, the seal, sentry and sign were gone. I was greatly relieved. This monk seal on my beach had been one of the most anxiety-producing wildlife experiences I had ever suffered through.

Most of us are delighted to see rare, native wildlife on the main islands but we must be careful not to love it to death. You can help basking monk seals by learning what's normal for them, then spreading the word. Remember:

■ Monk seals are shy, solitary animals that seek warmth and rest after long stints in the ocean searching for food. When lying on a beach, monk seals are NOT stranded, like dolphins and whales.

■ When wet, monk seals look like they have sleek, dolphin-type skin. This is not the case. Monk seals have fur, like all other seals, and molt each year. During these molts, fur falls off in pieces and looks mangy. This is normal.

■ Sometimes, monk seal eyes drip tears while the animal basks on a beach. This is also normal.

■ If you see a monk seal, do NOT rush to it. If possible, don't even let it see you. Call any local wildlife agency, public or private, to report it. They will know the proper authorities to call.

Susan Scott is a marine science writer and author of three books about Hawaii's environment. Her Ocean Watch column appears Monday in the Star-Bulletin.