

Environment

Who Is Killing Hawaii's Endangered Monk Seals?

People have killed at least 16 seals since 2009. Only one case been prosecuted.



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By Marcel Honore    / June 23, 2023

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When federal officials announced earlier this month the death of Malama, a young female monk seal pup whom they believe was likely killed intentionally, the case sparked widespread community outrage and calls to bring whomever is responsible to justice.

However, since 2009 federal authorities have managed to prosecute just one of 16 confirmed cases in which a critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal was intentionally killed, according to the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Those 16 cases don't include Malama, officially known as RQ76, whose body was found in March near Waianae [with blunt-force injuries](#). Her death still has not been confirmed as intentional.

It's not clear why NOAA has struggled for so long to prosecute those responsible for killing these seals that are native to and only live in the Hawaiian Islands. A spokesman for the agency's law enforcement branch did

not respond to requests this past week to discuss the general challenges that they face.



The death of Hawaiian monk seal RQ76, also known as Malama, has sparked renewed outreach over monk seal killings. Only one case has been prosecuted since 2009 out of 16 confirmed intentional killings. (The Marine Mammal Center, NOAA Permit #24359/2023)

Monk seal advocates and community elders say part of the problem is that NOAA has to make better inroads with local communities and improve its outreach on the seals. That community engagement would pay off in better protecting the seals, and it could lead to more help when investigations are launched into killings, they said.

“The federal government has taken a really active role in trying to protect these seals,” said Walter Ritte, a prominent community activist from Molokai, which endured [a spate of monk seal deaths](#) in 2021.

NOAA confirmed three monk seals were intentionally killed on Molokai that year, including one shot in the head that was about a year old. The feds suspected several others found dead on the Friendly Isle were also killed by humans but the investigations remain unsolved.

Ritte said NOAA officers approached him about a year ago, saying they intended to do a “serious investigation” into the Molokai seal deaths, but he hasn’t heard from them since.

He suspects the federal government is hamstrung to a degree by its rules on what it can and cannot do and how it interacts with the public.

“They do not know how to work in the Hawaiian community,” Ritte said.

Ritte, 78, knows some of those responsible for killing monk seals on Molokai, and said they now feel remorseful for what they did and would be willing to advocate for the animals. He said he approached NOAA to see if they would offer those culprits leniency, but NOAA refused.



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 have not prosecuted the crime. (Courtesy: Todd Yamashita/2023)

Melina Clark, a monk seal advocate who spent 15 years volunteering for the [Hawaii Marine Animal Response](#), said NOAA lacks sufficient staff, budget and resources to protect the seals and pursue those that kill them.

“It’s just spread thin,” she said. “There’s not enough eyes in the community or law enforcement making their presence known.”

Dominic Andrews, a public affairs officer with NOAA’s Office of Law Enforcement, did not respond to questions about the division’s staffing and budget.

He said the agency does not comment on ongoing investigations. It’s not clear, however, how many of the 15 remaining cases dating back to 2009 remain open.

Meanwhile, three local conservation groups are pooling their resources to boost the reward for any information that leads to successful prosecution in Malama’s killing.

The [Hawaiian Monk Seal Preservation Ohana](#), [For the Fishes](#) and [Conservation Council Hawaii](#) announced they would offer a reward of at least \$5,000 for that information. It’s meant to compliment a \$5,000 reward put forth by NOAA.

Hawaiian Monk Seal Preservation Ohana Executive Director Dana Jones called NOAA’s low clearance rate “incredibly upsetting.”

Locals having knowledge of the killings but then deciding to remain tight-lipped is part of the problem, Jones said.

“Nothing is that secret on an island like this,” she said Wednesday. “If you live here, you know how it is ... people aren’t going to turn in family.”

NOAA should be more active in the community, she said, getting the public more involved, engaged and interested in the monk seals to help change any indifference or hostility against the animals.

Her group and its predecessors have educated more than 60,000 local students about monk seals through classroom presentations in the past 18 years.

“We’ve made a dent” in public perception, Jones said. “That took a lot of work.”

‘They Are Hawaiian Seals’

Currently, there are estimated to be some 1,500 Hawaiian monk seals left. Roughly 400 live in the Main Hawaiian Islands and the rest live in the mostly uninhabited and federally protected Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

What made Malama’s death especially demoralizing was that NOAA, the Coast Guard and other agencies had just gone to great lengths to rehabilitate the seal as a pup after her mother weaned her too early.

“There was a lot of partnership involved in saving that seal’s life,” Jones said. She died, however, before she could produce more pups.

The federal government’s lone prosecution dates back to 2009, when Kauai resident Charles Vidinha was convicted for [shooting to death a pregnant seal](#) at Pilaa Beach. He received a three-month jail sentence and \$25 fine, and the case helped prompt state lawmakers to make such seal killings a felony in Hawaii.

The remaining 15 seal killings are either open cases or “remain unsolved,” according to NOAA.

On Molokai, much of the anti-seal sentiment stems from several prominent Hawaiian families who have helped spread misinformation about the animals, Ritte said.

Those family elders have claimed that the seals aren’t actually Hawaiian, he said, and spread conspiracy theories that they were introduced to the



Molokai resident and activist Walter Ritte says, “Whatever happens to these seals is going to happen to Hawaiians.” (Cory Lum/Civil Beat/2021)

islands by the federal government.

“That’s the beginning of the bad attitude that people have toward the seals,” Ritte said. He declined to name the families, but said they’re influential across the island.

Compounding the problem is the false belief that the seals are “fierce competitors” for the same fish as humans, he said.

“We need to let people know that these seals were here — that they are Hawaiian seals,” Ritte said Thursday.

He recalled a trio of monk seals sleeping nearby him and other demonstrators on a Molokai beach in 2009 as they protested a proposed development there.

“In my mind, I was thinking, how we treat these Hawaiian monk seals is the same way we’re going to be treated,” Ritte said. “Whatever happens to these seals is going to happen to Hawaiians.”

NOAA encourages anyone with information regarding Malama’s death to call its enforcement hotline at 800-853-1964.

Anyone with information can also call, text or send pictures to a tip line for the separate reward being offered by the conservation groups at 808-NO-POACH.

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Marcel Honore [Twitter](#) [Email](#) [RSS](#)

Marcel Honore is a reporter for Civil Beat. You can email him at mhonore@civilbeat.org

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