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Hawaiian monk seal RL72 on Hawai'i Island. (Photo © The Marine Mammal Center)

Hawaiian Monk Seal Relocated After Biting Divers Off Kona



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STORY SUMMARY

KONA, Hawai'i - Monk seal "RL72" was recently translocated to Kamole after the animal began nipping at divers in the Makako Bay area, eventually biting one in the head.

(BIVN) – A Hawaiian monk seal that was said to be approaching and biting divers in the waters off Kona has been translocated to a remote island in Papahānaumokuākea.

The 5-year-old monk seal, identified as RL72, was taken last Friday (June 7, 2024) to Kamole, also known as Laysan Island. RL72 will join an estimated population of more than 200 Hawaiian monk seals at Kamole.

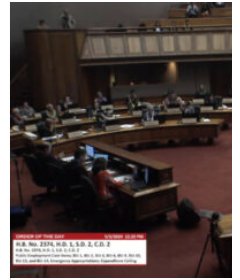
Officials decided to move RL72 due to an observed pattern of escalating underwater interactions with divers and snorkelers off the west coast of Hawai'i Island.

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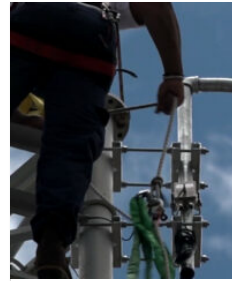
2-Minute Tip for a Ant-Free

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"We received initial reports of the seal approaching divers and nipping fins and dive equipment in the Makako Bay area in December 2023," a NOAA news release stated. "The reports included an incident in which RL72 bit a diver on the head (non-serious injury)."



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“We reviewed footage of that incident and did not observe any indication the diver had been interacting with the seal or provoked the bite in any way. RL72’s behavior was very concerning, and cause for potential intervention,” NOAA said.



Three Hawaiian monk seals lie together on Kamole /Laysan Island. (Photo courtesy NOAA Fisheries/Calla Lloyd-Lim

NOAA explained the reasoning that prompted the translocation of the monk seal:

To Move or Not to Move

Any time we identify a seal that may need potential intervention, we conduct a careful and thorough risk assessment. In RL72’s case, we actively monitored the seal to determine whether a move was necessary for the seal’s long-term welfare and for public safety. We established serious behavior triggers that would prompt

intervention, including behavior that posed a risk of serious injury or drowning to humans.

We also worked closely with partners to provide guidance on what to do if RL72 approached people underwater. We stressed backing away from the seal, not engaging him from any distance, and exiting the water if RL72 was present. We hoped that RL72 would lose interest in people and instead interact with other seals.

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Unfortunately, RL72's interactive behavior with ocean users increased and escalated. He continued to follow ocean users during the day and at night, biting gear, nipping at arms, and attempting to mount scuba divers. We reviewed multiple videos of divers ignoring and swimming away from RL72 when the seal approached, but RL72 pursued them, biting at dive gear and attempting to mount them. In one instance, RL72 mounted and held onto a diver during a daytime dive. In another instance, RL72 bit a snorkeler on the back, deep enough to penetrate their wetsuit and cause a puncture injury.

Taken together, the combination of RL72 holding onto people underwater and biting unprovoked presented the risk of seriously injuring or drowning people and prompted intervention. We asked The Marine Mammal Center, our Hawai'i Island partner, to collect RL72 at a safe opportunity. Conditions aligned on June 4. The Center's trained responders from its hospital Ke Kai Ola successfully and safely collected RL72.

RL72 will join a previously scheduled departing vessel and make a 2-day journey to the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. We believe that in this remote location—away from people and surrounded by many more monk seals than at Hawai'i Island—RL72 has the greatest chance at returning to normal wild seal behaviors.

Officials say you can help protect these native seals by calling the **NOAA Marine Wildlife Hotline, (888) 256-9840**, to report sightings, strandings, seal injuries, interaction incidents, as well as suspected illegal behavior toward seals.
