

Mail Buoy

AUGUST 1991

HAWAII FISHING NEWS



You state that a better course of action would have been to ban inshore set nets in the area frequented by the seal. This is a matter of State law, and if your suggested action were possible, it would likely take longer than the period of weaning and learning to forage by the young seal. Additionally, the large area that would have been explored by the pup would require this ban to cover an extensive area. During the 45 days after the seal was born, many NMFS staff and volunteers remained on the beach around the clock, monitoring the mother-pup pair; they observed incidents in which net fishermen insisted on trying to fish within the small enclosed area cordoned off to prevent interactions with people and dogs. Monk seals are particularly sensitive to human disturbance—whether it is well-intentioned or malicious.

Finally, we do not know that monk seals are beginning to reinhabit the main Hawaiian Islands. Certainly a comparison of beach counts today with those of 40 years ago suggests that the remote breeding sites are not becoming overcrowded. Still, the birth on O'ahu and the two births on Kaua'i in recent years are unprecedented. If at all possible, we would prefer to leave these seals in the main islands, and in fact, the two pups born on Kaua'i were left there. However, with the high population density and gamut of marine activities around O'ahu, we felt it best for this pup to be moved to Kure, where she can ultimately contribute to the recovery of the population.

Sincerely,
George W. Boehlert
Director, Honolulu Laboratory

Dear Chuck,

Thank you for publishing the text of NOAA's press release on moving the Hawaiian monk seal pup from O'ahu to Kure Atoll in your "Enough's Enough" section (HFN July 1991). Your accompanying editorial, however, was somewhat harsh. It alleges "seal-napping, harassment and cruelty" by the National Marine Fisheries Service and contains errors to which I would like to respond.

We did not "...separate the seal family before the mother had an opportunity to teach her young pup to feed..." As stated in the press release, the mother left after nursing the pup for 45 days. This is the normal pattern; Hawaiian monk seal pups are not taught to feed by their mothers and instead must learn to feed by themselves, a process which takes months. During this learning process, pups extensively explore inshore reef areas, a behavior that makes them particularly susceptible to entanglement in set nets and debris. Deaths from entanglements have even been observed in the seal populations of the pristine Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Your supposition that the pup was "probably terrified and drugged" during its airlift is similarly incorrect. We did not administer drugs to the seal, which in fact slept during most of the U.S. Coast Guard flight to Kure.

Editor's Response:

Differences of opinion create a learning environment. In your letter citing my supposition as being incorrect about the "probable" drugging of the baby monk seal, I'd like to point out my use of the word "probably." As it is defined in Webster's, probably means "based on evidence which inclines the mind to believe but leaves some room for doubt." Checking further with those involved in preparing monk seals for transport we were told the following: baby monks are not tranquilized for the simple reason they are too frightened to move about in the shipping cage. On the other hand, our source advised us that adult monk seals are sedated with drugs because they go nuts during the ordeal of transportation in cages. Your response implies that the baby monk seal just kicked back and enjoyed the trip between snozes. I am still "inclined" to believe transportation and relocation are stressful experiences.

Of additional interest, since the removal of the baby monk seal, the police and DLNR have been inundated with calls from La'ie on the North Shore to 'Ewa Beach (nearly 50 miles of coastline) reporting sightings of a monk seal (presumably the mother seal) poking its head out of the inshore waters, searching the coastline and possibly looking for her young pup. Just maybe there's an attachment or bonding between the two you are not aware of.

While on the subject of transporting mammals on the endangered species list, how about shipping a few thousand green sea turtles to less populated areas? The green sea turtles have repopulated the main islands to the point where they are now in plague proportions in many areas. It's not unusual to see 30 or more crowding the shallows of beaches on O'ahu, Lana'i and Molokai. It has been reported that their excrement has polluted sandy beaches. Plus, they are devouring quantities of limu and tako, two of their food sources. It appears that the green sea turtle is no longer endangered in the main islands, and in fact has, under the protective provisions of the law, reached nuisance proportions. Perhaps the recent reports of sick and dying turtles infected with ugly tumors are an indication of overcrowding or nature taking its course to balance an explosive population in a fragile ecosystem subject to the meddling of man.

... Chuck