

How NOAA is Fast Tracking the Monk Seals to Extinction under Permit

PEIS Testimony by Dr. George R. Harker, submitted by email November 30, 2010

NOAA tells us that Monk Seals are “sensitive to human interaction” so why are they systematically subjecting them to that interaction?

There are approximately 100 individual seals known to NOAA in the main Hawaiian Islands.

KP2 What really happened? And perhaps more importantly what happened to his mom?

The general story line put out for public consumption is something like this: KP2 was abandoned by his mother. Fortunately NOAA was watching and picked him up to take care of him. He was successfully raised at Kewalo Research Facility on Oahu.

After eight months of captivity he was released at Kalaupapa on Molokai. After a few days he showed up at Kaunakakai Wharf and found some new friends that weren't seals.

KP2 was too friendly for his own good and was recaptured by NOAA. He was found to have cataracts and it was deemed necessary to keep him permanently in captivity. (Source www.themonksealproject.com/?p=872)

KP2 Another interpretation of events and what really happened based on the NOAA source . The real tragedy of this story is not KP2 but the loss of RK22 a young female just entering the reproductive phase of her life and the impact of “takes” on the general seal population.

A year earlier in 2007 KP2's mother RK22 had her first pup under the watchful eye of NOAA personnel. NOAA felt that the relationship between mom and pup was not going the way it was supposed to go. They got actively involved moving the baby about trying to put it closer to mom and so forth, Keep in mind NOAA literature describes the mom pup relationship at this stage as very tenuous and that human interaction will result in the mom abandoning the pup.

“A year earlier, RK22 had given birth to her first pup, a female. At that time, RK22 showed no interest in her pup, even when the newborn cried out for her. NOAA officials tried desperately to get mom and pup together. They placed the pup within visual range of RK22, but she swam away. They tried again. Nothing. By the fifth day NOAA took the pup and gave her an examination. She was emaciated and weak. The only humane thing left to do, they concluded, was to euthanize the pup (Source www.themonksealproject.com/?p=872).

Why NOAA has injected itself into the pup rearing process at such an early stage? They know the mom is having its first pup. It is a learning process for the seal as it responds to programmed behavior evolved over thirteen million years of the species existence. Note that in the description they have provided they are actively moving the pup about when it is only a day or two old!

The literature indicates that “the pup does not nurse immediately after birth” (Adrienne Garbiel,

Chapter 10 Monk Seals Monachus Fleming 1822, CZMT-0636-DE1, Oceanographic Center Nova Southeastern University.)

At day five they took the pup away from her mom. After examination they decided the pup was weak and emaciated and the only humane thing to do was to euthanize it.

So what has happened here? NOAA has injected itself into the birthing of a monk seal by a totally inexperienced mother from the onset. NOAA doesn't know what is supposed to happen, Mother monk seal is trying to figure things out but is not given a chance. Before you can say, "Monk seals are sensitive to human interaction" fifty times and really let this sink in and understand what it means the seal pup is grabbed and placed near its mom within sight distance. This handling of the pup is done repeatedly! Mom is probably confused by the human scent associated with what she thought was her offspring which should have smelled like her.

In a study reported by William G. Gilman, **Responses of Hawaiian Monk Seals to Human Disturbance and Handling**. "In the mid 1960s research conducted... at Kure by Wirtz (1968) was also a likely contributing factor in the high loss of pups during his two years of field work there. He assessed pup survival and found that only one of the 62 pups born in 1964-65 survived to one year of age. His research, however, involved repeated handling of nursing pups which would have caused a high level of disturbance not only to the mother-pup pairs, but to other seals hauled on the beaches as well."

NOAA would have the public believe that Monk Seals are solitary critters and once the pup is weaned have no interaction. There is no bond between animals! Not true! Mother knew, and the other seals knew that one of their kind had died after being taken from its mother by humans.

Move forward to May 1, 2008 KP2 born. On the first day, "A year later it was happening all over again. And this time the instructions to Olry from her bosses were very clear. Give the mother and pup **a day to reunite**. If that fails, rescue him." Emphasis added.

Again note: The literature indicates that "the pup does not nurse immediately after birth" (Adrienne Garbiel, Chapter 10 Monk Seals Monachus Fleming 1822, CZMT-0636-DE1, Oceanographic Center Nova Southeastern University.)

Veterinarian Greg Levine is called in to take the pup. Ironically the photograph shows the mother vocalizing and defending the "abandoned" pup from the vet. Levine has to exercise a strategy to extricate the "abandoned" pup from its mom. Source www.themonksealproject.com/?p=872.

KP2 moved to Kewalo Research Facility on Oahu with Levine. Early on the seal develops cornea edema. At the 4th annual NMFS Hawaiian Monk Seal & Cetacean Stranding Response Network Meeting presentation Dr. Greg Levine talks about **Hawaiian Monk Seal "KP2"**

In that talk it sounds like there was some improvement and thus KP2 was released eight months after his initial capture. Levine talks about this cataracts problem being commonly found in captive marine mammals. I would learn later from a variety of other sources that most marine

mammals in captivity are blind.

I also heard at this conference reports that KP2's mother may be in area and pregnant. The identification was not positive and it could be another seal.

Marine Mammal Response Network Activity Update, September-December 2009 #13 page 2
Table 1 **Summary of main Hawaiian island monk seal births in 2009** does not show any for RK22. I have been unable to locate any additional information on this seal. She no longer appears to be part of the breeding population.

KP2 is released at Kalaupapa, Molokai on December 15, 2008. Within weeks he had made his way around to Kaunakakai Wharf.

October 16, 2009 KP2 is recaptured and taken back to Oahu. In the Monk Seal Project Report there is much talk and speculation about how KP2's behavior will eventually lead to death or serious injury of someone in the future. This idea that the seal is "too friendly for its own good" will be the basis for this take and others done by NOAA.

Reviewing the literature and talking with many people about their encounters with monk seals I have found nothing to suggest that seals are dangerous. I have talked with a number of people that have had their arm or even their head within the jaws of a monk seal and suffered no ill effects. (Yes I said "head." Told to me by scuba diver who had quite an enjoyable time playing with the well known Humpy the monk seal.)

This Matra of "too friendly" will become the rally point for justifying the "Take" of RO42. A two year old seal mothered by RO15. I would get to know this mother seal in October of 2009 when she came over to Maui to have her eight pup at Koki Beach on October 9, 2009. (For a more complete look at the rearing go:

<http://drleisure.com/KokiHawaiianMonkSealDocumentation2009.pdf>)

The "take" of RO15's daughter occurred eight months before Koki was born outside Hana. In preparing these comments and researching the KP2 story I found reference to RO42 in the 4th Annual Stranding meeting previously referenced. I had video of a number of sessions. Reviewing the video I found numerous reference to RO15 and her offspring. As I am understanding things RO15 was the matriarchal head of the Big Island enclave of seals. Referred to as the "Mother of all seals" by various presenters. Her offspring were the problem for NOAA and others apparently not familiar with Hawaiian monk seal behavior, ie. that they are by nature very friendly animals.

David Schofield, NOAA reported on the details of snatching RO42 and taking her to the Northern Hawaiian Islands. Volunteers were pleased to be involved in helping to "save" this troubled juvenile seal from a life of friendly cohabitation with humans in the Main Hawaiian Island. (<http://monksealmania.blogspot.com/>)

The loss of this maturing young female to the breeding population is one aspect of damage to the monk seal restoration project. The more significant issue is the impact on the main breeding

colony of seals on the Big Island. The successful reproduction of seals on the island of Hawaii was brought to an end! Mother RO15 was successfully driven off the island after seven pups.

She went to the island of Maui. She had her 8th pup there. She was cordoned off and “protected” intensely for two months. There was even talk of snatching and moving Koki before he became “too friendly.”

Mother weaned the pup and continued to maintain contact with him in the months to follow contrary to NOAA belief that mom’s break that contact with their young. (<http://drleisure.com/KokiHawaiianMonkSealDocumentation2009.pdf>)

Apparently the intensity and scrutiny of NOAA on Maui encouraged RO15 to return to the Big Island. Reports from NOAA to me at the scooping meeting indicate that mom is fourteen miles up a stream bed in a remote area.

Based on my observations of mom and her pup rearing capabilities this new location can not work. Mother and pup need direct access to the ocean for successful rearing.

It appears to me that RO15 has been lost to the breeding and reproducing sector of the Hawaiian Monk Seal population.

Conclusions and Recommendations

It can already be shown that the involvement of NOAA in “protecting and helping” the monk seal has resulted in dramatic negative impacts on virtually every island in the main Hawaiian Islands. Loss of new mother RK22 in Kauai. KP2 snatching in Molokai. Driving RO15 off the Big Island.

Other examples of a systematic approach to the destruction of the Hawaiian Monk Seal are the placement of transmitters on seals through out the islands. The program of cordoning off seals that come into any accessible beach by eager helpful volunteers under color of NOAA permit. Annually bleach marking seals previously identified by tags that can be identified by natural markings such as cookie cutter shark bites and natural color variation patterns. The level of sustained human interaction with monk seals has never been higher.

And the seals are paying for it with their lives!

Dr. George R. Harker November 29, 2010