

# HAWAIIAN MONK SEAL

*Neomonachus schauinslandi*

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*Did you know...*

...the Hawaiian name for the Hawaiian monk seal, ‘Īlio holo i ka uaua, means “the dog that runs in the rough sea”



*Monk seal swimming in west Maui. Photo: E. Lyman/NOAA, under NOAA Permit #15240*

## Population Trends

Hawaiian monk seals are one of the most endangered seal species in the U.S., with an estimated 1,600 seals remaining as of 2024. Pup production is highly variable from year to year. Of the three known species of monk seals, only two still exist— the Hawaiian and the Mediterranean. The Caribbean monk seal was last sighted in 1952, and is extinct.

## Distribution & Movement Patterns

Hawaiian monk seals are endemic to the Hawaiian Islands, living nowhere else in the world. Breeding populations are at six major locations in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. A relatively small number, about 400, live in the waters around the main Hawaiian Islands, many of them in Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. Sandy beaches and lava benches are preferred “haul out” or resting sites for monk seals.

## Feeding Patterns

Prey include bottom and reef fishes, eels, octopus, squid and crustaceans. Most feeding occurs at depths less than 300 feet (90 m), although the deepest recorded dive was greater than 1,700 feet (500 m).



*Hawaiian monk seals are protected under the Endangered Species Act, the Marine Mammal Protection Act, and Hawai'i State law.*

*Report any suspected violations to NOAA Fisheries Enforcement at 1-800-853-1964*

*If you see a monk seal on a beach, do not disturb it, and DO call NOAA Fisheries to report the sightings or emergencies at 1-888-256-9840*

*Remember: monk seals need to rest to conserve energy for hunting and diving. Please keep dogs on a leash and away from seals to avoid bites and disease transmission.*

## Natural History

Female monk seals reach sexual maturity around five years of age. Roughly 65% of all adult females give birth each year. Pups measure about three feet at birth and weigh about 30 pounds. Their weight may increase to as much as 150 to 200 pounds before weaning. Mothers do not eat while lactating, and pups are weaned at about five to seven weeks of age. Hawaiian monk seals can grow up to 600 pounds, and reach six to seven feet long. The lifespan of a Hawaiian monk seal can be over 30 years, but few live that long.

## Threats

- Entanglement by marine debris and derelict fishing gear
- Disturbance, vessel strike, or intentional killing by humans
- Male seal aggression on female and juvenile populations
- Habitat loss due to storm erosion and sea level rise
- Ocean contaminants and diseases like toxoplasmosis
- Shark predation at Lalo (French Frigate Shoals)

## Recovery Efforts

- Responding to monk seal haul-out sightings and strandings
- Engaging communities and strengthening partnerships
- Ensuring natural population growth and reducing human-seal interactions through outreach and education
- Supporting monk seal rehabilitation and veterinary care, including vaccinations, disentanglement, and other injuries

## Research

- Assessing and monitoring population size and threats
- Tracking the efficacy of population enhancement activities
- Identifying causes of injuries and mortalities
- Studying monk seal diseases and parasites
- Analyzing genetic data to better understand seal health, population dynamics, and diet
- Investigating foraging behavior and connections between monk seal feeding and fisheries

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