

PAPAHĀNAUMOKUĀKEA



PRESS RELEASE

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Journal Findings Highlight New Discoveries in Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument

Humpback whales make lengthy migrations from feeding grounds in the North Pacific to breed in the warm and sheltered waters of Hawai'i every winter – and it now appears they have a greater range of vacation destinations available. New findings published today in the journal *Endangered Species Research* reveal for the first time that humpbacks whales – once hunted to near-extinction in the North Pacific – are now spending their winters in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands in the protected waters of the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Whale researchers from the Protected Species Division at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center have discovered that endangered humpback whales are using portions of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as wintering habitat. These observations were made on a NOAA research cruise across the western end of the Hawaiian archipelago in March 2007.

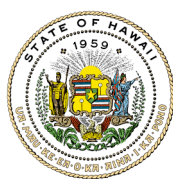
"It was quite surprising actually," stated Dr. Dave Johnston, the team leader for cetacean research at the science center. "Whenever we surveyed in shallow warm areas, we found humpback whales."

Johnston and his colleagues were especially intrigued when they observed small calves accompanying some whales, and witnessed humpbacks conducting behaviors usually associated with breeding – further evidence that humpbacks were wintering in these remote waters. Prior to this study, it was believed that humpbacks wintered only in the main Hawaiian Islands.

"This is a significant find," noted Dave Mattila, the science coordinator for NOAA's Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary. "We've seen humpbacks expand their use of the main Hawaiian Islands but were unaware that they also used the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as wintering habitat."

- More -

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The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument was designated last year and is the largest fully protected marine conservation area in the world. “We are excited to learn that the monument provides significant protection for yet another species of endangered wildlife and its habitat,” remarked Dr. Randy Kosaki, National Marine Sanctuary Program’s research coordinator for the monument. In fact, researchers estimate that approximately twice the amount of suitable wintering habitat is found in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as compared to the main Hawaiian Islands.

Very little is known about the whales and dolphins inhabiting the waters of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, and a follow up cruise is scheduled for February 2008. “I’m excited to get back up there,” stated Johnston “Every time we leave port, we embark on a voyage of discovery.”

The Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument is managed jointly by three co-trustees — the Department of Commerce, Department of the Interior and the State of Hawai‘i — and represents a cooperative conservation approach to protecting the entire ecosystem. The monument area includes the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge/Battle of Midway National Memorial, the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge, the Hawai‘i State Seabird Sanctuary at Kure Atoll, and Northwestern Hawaiian Islands State Marine Refuge.

The article was published in an open-access format in the latest issue of Endangered Species Research. (<http://www.int-res.com/abstracts/esr/v3/n3>)

For additional information on the monument, please visit <http://hawaiiireef.noaa.gov> or www.fws.gov/pacificislands.

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