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HAWAIIAN MONK SEAL (*Monachus schauinslandi*)

STOCK DEFINITION AND GEOGRAPHIC RANGE

Hawaiian monk seals are distributed throughout the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) in six main reproductive subpopulations at French Frigate Shoals, Laysan Island, Lisianski Island, Pearl and Hermes Reef, Midway Atoll, and Kure Atoll. Small subpopulations also exist at Necker Island and Nihoa Island and a few seals are distributed throughout the main Hawaiian Islands. Studies of Hawaiian monk seals have focused on their abundance and behavior on land during the reproductive season (spring and summer). Expanded research is underway, but currently the pelagic distribution and behavior of monk seals cannot be fully characterized.

In the last two centuries, the species has experienced two major declines which may have severely reduced its genetic variation. The tendency for genetic drift may have been (and continue to be) relatively large, due to the small size of different island/atoll subpopulations. However, 10-15% of these seals migrate among the subpopulations (Johnson and Kridler 1983; National Marine Fisheries Service [NMFS] unpubl. data) and, to some degree, this movement should counter the development of separate genetic stocks. Genetic variation among the different island populations is low (Kretzmann et al., 1997).

Demographically, the different island subpopulations have exhibited considerable independence. For example, abundance at French Frigate Shoals grew rapidly during the 1950s to the 1980s, while other subpopulations declined rapidly. However, variation in past population trends may be partially explained by changes in the level of human disturbance (Gerrodette and Gilmartin 1990). Current demographic variability among the subpopulations probably reflects a combination of different recent histories and varying environmental conditions. While research and recovery activities focus on the problems of single island/atoll subpopulations, the species is managed as a single stock.

POPULATION SIZE

Abundance of the main reproductive subpopulations is best estimated using the number of seals identified at each site. Individual seals are identified by applied flipper-tags and bleach-marks, and natural features such as scars and distinctive pelage patterns. Flipper-tagging of weaned pups began in the early 1980s, and the majority of the seals in the main reproductive subpopulations can be identified on the basis of those tags. In 1999, identification efforts were conducted during two- to five-month studies at all main reproductive sites except Midway Atoll, where the study period was 12 months. A total of 1344 seals (including 244 pups) were observed at the main reproductive subpopulations in 1999 (Johanos and Baker, 2001). Removal analyses in previous years and sighting probability calculations suggest that 90% or more of the seals were identified at each site (i.e., any negative bias should be less than 10%).

Monk seals also occur at Necker and Nihoa Islands, where counts are only conducted once or a few times in a single year. Abundance is estimated by correcting the mean of all beach counts accrued over the past five years. The mean (±SD) of all counts (excluding pups) conducted during the five years ending in 1999 were 18.4 (±9.6) at Necker Island and 20.0 (±4.9) at Nihoa Island (NMFS unpubl. data).

The observed relationship between mean counts and total abundance at the reproductive sites indicates that the total abundance can be estimated by multiplying the mean count by a correction factor (±SE) of 2.89 (±0.06, NMFS unpubl. data). Resulting estimates (plus the average number of pups known to have been born in the five years ending in 1999) are 54.2(±27.7) at Necker Island and 61.8 (±14.2) at Nihoa Island.

Finally, a small number of seals are distributed throughout the main Hawaiian Islands. These include an unknown number of seals, which naturally occur in the main Hawaiian Islands. In addition, twenty-one seals were released around these islands in 1994. All but two were subsequently resighted near their respective release sites, but their survival to 1999 is unknown, because there is no formal resighting effort in the main Hawaiian Islands. The first systematic survey of Hawaiian monk seals in the main Hawaiian Islands was conducted in 2000, however the data have not been thoroughly analyzed to date. In previous Stock Assessment Reports, abundance in the main Hawaiian Islands had been estimated at 40 seals with a coefficient of variation of 10 seals. Because the recent survey numbers are not analyzed, this previous estimate will be used for 1999.

Minimum Population Estimate

The total number of seals identified at the main reproductive sites is the best estimate of minimum population size at those sites (i.e., 1344 seals). Minimum population sizes for Necker and Nihoa Islands (based on the formula

provided by Wade and Angliss (1997)) are 36 and 51, respectively. If it is assumed that the abundance estimate for seals in the main Hawaiian Islands is, as described above, 40 ±10 seals (i.e., a coefficient of variation of 0.25), then an estimate of the minimum population size in the main Islands is 33 seals. The minimum population size for the entire stock (species) is the sum of these estimates, or 1464 seals.

Current Population Trend

Between 1958 and 1999, the total of mean non-pup beach counts at the main reproductive subpopulations declined by approximately 60%. From 1985 to 1999, the average rate of decline was approximately 3% yr^{-1}, although the counts have been stable since 1993 (Fig. 1). Further decline is likely, due to extremely high juvenile mortality and an inverted age structure which will result in reduced reproductive recruitment in the largest subpopulation (French Frigate Shoals).

CURRENT AND MAXIMUM NET PRODUCTIVITY RATES

Assuming mean beach counts are a reliable index of total abundance, then the current net productivity rate for this species is -0.03 yr^{-1} (loglinear regression of beach counts of non-pups, 1985-99; R^2 = 0.82, P<0.001). This trend is largely due to a severe decline at French Frigate Shoals, where non-pup beach counts decreased by 60% between 1989 and 1999. Populations at Laysan and Lisianski Islands have remained relatively stable since approximately 1990.

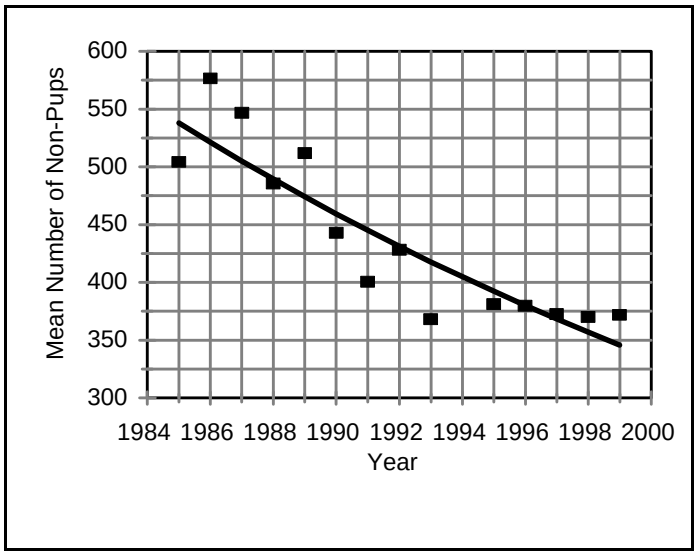

Figure 8. Mean beach counts of Hawaiian monk seals (non-pups) at the main reproductive rookeries (excluding Midway Atoll), 1985-99.

Contrary to trends at the above sites, the subpopulation at Kure Atoll has grown at ca. 5% yr^{-1} since 1983 (loglinear regression of beach counts, 1983-99; R^2 = 0.82, P<0.001), due largely to decreased human disturbance and introduced females. The subpopulation at Pearl and Hermes Reef has grown at approximately 6% yr^{-1} since 1983 (loglinear regression of beach counts, 1983-1999; R^2 = 0.82, P<0.001). Growth of the Pearl and Hermes population may be slowing slightly, as previous to 1999 the growth rate averaged 7%yr^{-1} (Forney *et al.* 2000). This latter annual growth rate is the best indicator of the maximum net productivity rate (R_{max}) for this species. Finally, the small subpopulation at Midway Atoll continues to show signs of recovery.

POTENTIAL BIOLOGICAL REMOVAL

The potential biological removal (PBR) level for this stock is calculated as the minimum population size (1464) times one half the maximum net growth rate for this stock (½ of 7%) times a recovery factor of 0.1 (for an endangered species, Wade and Angliss 1997), which yields a PBR of 5 monk seals per year. However, while the Pearl and Hermes Reef population for some time exhibited the net growth rate of 7% used to calculate PBR, it is clear that the population as a whole is not currently growing (Fig. 1). Thus, the population appears unlikely to increase in the near future, even without the potential removal of 5 animals per year.

HUMAN-CAUSED MORTALITY AND SERIOUS INJURY

Human-related mortality has caused two major declines of the Hawaiian monk seal. In the 1800s, this species was decimated by sealers, crews of wrecked vessels, and guano and feather hunters (Dill and Bryan 1912; Wetmore 1925; Clapp and Woodward 1972). Several subpopulations may have been driven extinct; for example, no seals were seen

at Midway Atoll during a 14-month period in 1888-89, and only a single seal was seen during three months of observations at Laysan Island in 1912-13 (Bailey 1952). A survey in 1958 indicated at least partial recovery of the species in the first half of this century (Rice 1960). However, subsequent surveys revealed that all subpopulations except French Frigate Shoals declined severely after the late 1950s (or earlier). This second decline has not been explained at Pearl and Hermes Reef, or Lisianski and Laysan Islands. At Kure Atoll, Midway Atoll, and French Frigate Shoals, trends appear to have been determined by the pattern of human disturbance from military or U.S. Coast Guard activities. Such disturbance caused pregnant females to abandon prime pupping habitat and nursing females to abandon their pups (Kenyon 1972; Gerrodette and Gilmartin 1990). The result was a decrease in pup survival, which led to poor reproductive recruitment, low productivity, and population decline.

Since 1979, disturbance from human activities on land has been limited primarily to Kure and Midway Atolls. The U.S. Coast Guard LORAN station at Kure Atoll was closed in 1992 and vacated in 1993. The U.S. Naval Air Facility at Midway was closed in 1993 and, following clean-up and restoration activities, jurisdiction was transferred in 1997 to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, which manages the atoll as a National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge station and the atoll runway are maintained cooperatively with a commercial aircraft company, which supports its Midway operations, in part, by establishing a tourism center at the site. Strict regulations have been established to prevent further human disturbance of the seals, but careful monitoring of human activities will be essential to ensure that the regulations are both adequate and observed (see Habitat Issues below).

In addition to disturbance on land, disturbance at sea (e.g., direct and indirect fisheries interactions) may also impede recovery. As described below, however, the possible types of disturbance at sea cannot yet be characterized or quantified.

Fishery Information

Detrimental fishery interactions with monk seals fall into four categories: operations/gear conflict, entanglement in fisheries debris (most of which likely originate in North Pacific fisheries outside the NWHI), seal consumption of potentially toxic discards, and competition for prey. Since 1982, a total of nine fishery-related monk seal deaths have been recorded, including six from entanglement in fisheries debris (Henderson 1990, 2001; NMFS, unpubl. data), one from entanglement in the bridle rope of lobster trap (1986; NMFS, unpubl. data), one from entanglement in an illegally set gill net off the western shore of Oahu (1994; NMFS, unpubl. data), and one from ingestion of a recreational fish hook and probable drowning off the island of Kauai (1995; NMFS, unpubl. data). In addition, 17 other seals have been observed with embedded fish hooks, 23 seals have been observed with wounds suspected to have resulted from interactions with fisheries, and 197 cases of seals entangled in fishing gear or other debris have been observed through 1999 (Henderson 2001; NMFS, unpubl. data). Importantly, the majority of these deaths and injuries have been observed incidentally during land-based research or other activities; monk seal/fisheries interactions need to be monitored to assess the rate of fisheries-related injury or mortality for this species.

Four fisheries interact with Hawaiian monk seals. The NWHI lobster fishery began in the late 1970s, and developed rapidly in the early 1980s (Polovina, 1993). Annual landings peaked in 1985 (1.92 million lobsters) and 1986 (1.69 million lobsters; Haight and DiNardo 1995). Thereafter, the fishery declined and was closed temporarily in 1993 due to low spawning stock biomass of spiny lobster. Since 1994, landings remained lower than in the mid- to late 1980s, while catch of slipper lobster has increased in some areas. The number of vessels in the fishery increased from four in 1983 to 17 in 1985, then ranged from 0-12 during 1991-1999, with six vessels participating in 1999 (Dollar 1995; DiNardo et al. 1998; Kawamoto and Pooley, 2000). Historically, both effort and landings have been concentrated at Gardner Pinnacles, Maro Reef, Necker Island, and St. Rogatien Bank (Clarke and Todoki 1988; Polovina and Moffitt 1989). However, spatial management of the NWHI lobster fishery began in 1998 with the formation of four management areas: Necker Island (Area 1), Maro Reef (Area 2), Gardner Pinnacles (Area 3), and all remaining banks from Nihoa Island in the east to Kure Atoll in the west (Area 4). This approach was adopted in an effort to prevent local depletion of lobster stocks at Necker Island, Maro Reef, and Gardner Pinnacles and to disperse fishing effort, which in recent years had been limited to Necker Island and Maro Reef. As a result of the new management approach, 59,500 lobsters, comprising 25% of the total catch, were taken from Area 4, which, until 1998, had not been fished since the early 1990's (DiNardo et al.1998; Kawamoto and Pooley 2000). Summaries of catch by area, trends and available data on bycatch are published in annual reports, the most recent being Kawamoto and Pooley (2000). A significant portion of the Area 4 catch in 1999 was taken at locations where monk seal subpopulations occur. Neither incidental mortality nor serious

injury have been observed by NMFS observers of the lobster fishery through 1999. As was noted, one mortality was documented in 1986; a monk seal drowned after becoming entangled in the bridle rope of an actively fishing lobster trap near Necker Island. The potential for indirect interaction due to competition for prey is being investigated (see Habitat Issues below).

NMFS closed the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands lobster fishery for the year 2000 season due to uncertainty in the estimates of biomass. The Agency intends to keep the fishery closed in Areas 1-3 through the year 2001 and in Area 4 through the year 2002. The Agency is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) for the fishery and ESA Section 7 consultation will be conducted prior to any opening the fishery. Furthermore, President Clinton's Executive Order (1/18/2001) creating the Northwest Hawaiian Islands coral reef ecosystem reserve also precludes much if not all lobster fishing in the NWHI.

On 16 October 1998 the *Paradise Queen II*, a lobster fishing vessel, ran aground on the eastern edge of Kure Atoll. In 1999, large portions of the hull and wheel house still remained on the reef, smaller structural pieces had washed ashore, and a large portion of the main deck had come to rest on Green Island. Monk seals occasionally hauled out on this deck. During an initial clean up effort soon after Paradise Queen II ran aground, accessible hazardous material and lobster traps were removed from the marine environment. Subsequently, more traps washed up on shore and were stacked on Green Island to await removal. Presently, all recovered traps (totaling several hundred) have been removed from the island. It is not known whether any more lobster traps remain in the waters of Kure Atoll.

The NWHI bottomfish fishery also interacts with monk seals. This fishery occurred at low levels (< 50 t per year) until 1977, steadily increased to 460 metric tons in 1987, then dropped to 284 metric tons in 1988, and varied from 137 - 201 metric tons per year from 1989-1999 (Kawamoto 1995; Moffitt, pers. comm.). The number of vessels rose from 19 in 1984 to 28 in 1987, and then varied from 10 to 17 in 1988 through 1999 (Kawamoto 1995; Moffitt, pers. comm.). Currently, the bottomfish fishery remains open, although its area of operation has been substantially restricted by President Clinton's Executive Order (1/18/2001). The Agency is preparing an Environmental Impact Statement and a Section 7 Biological Opinion on the operation of the fishery. The fishery was monitored by observers from October 1990 to December 1993 (ca. 13% coverage), but is currently monitored by the State of Hawaii using logbooks. However, the State logbook does not include information on protected species and, therefore, the nature and extent of interactions with monk seals cannot be assessed. Nitta and Henderson (1993) evaluated observer data from 1991-92 and reported an interaction rate of one event per 34.4 hours of fishing, but they do not provide a confidence interval for their estimate. The authors documented one seal found with a bottomfish hook in her mouth at French Frigate Shoals, observer reports of seals taking bottomfish and bait off fishing lines, and observer reports of seals attracted to discarded bottomfish bycatch, which may contain ciguatoxin or other biotoxins. Injury or mortality resulting from hooking or consumption of toxic discards cannot be determined with the available data. The ecological effects of this fishery on monk seals (e.g., competition for prey or alteration of prey assemblages by removal of key predator fishes) are unknown. However, published studies on monk seal prey selection based upon scat/spew analysis and seal-mounted video, rarely revealed evidence that monk seals fed on families of bottomfish which contain commercial species (many hard parts of scats and spews were identified only to the level of family; Goodman-Lowe 1998, Parrish et al. 2000). Fatty acid signature analysis is inconclusive regarding the importance of commercial bottomfish in the monk seal diet, but this methodology continues to be pursued.

A third fishery in which past interactions with monk seals were documented was the pelagic longline fishery. This fishery targets swordfish and tunas, primarily, and does not compete with Hawaiian monk seals for prey. The fishery began in the 1940s, and operated at a relatively low level (< 5000 t per year) until the mid-1980s. In 1987, 37 vessels participated, but by 1991, the number had grown to 141 (Ito, 1995). The number of active vessels ranged from 103-141 during 1991-99. Entry is currently limited to a maximum of 164 vessels (Ito and Machado, 1999). Total landings ranged from 8,100-13,000 metric tons during 1991-1999 (Ito, pers. comm.). While most of the fishery has operated outside of the NWHI Exclusive Economic Zone, the rapid expansion raised concerns about the potential for interactions with protected species, including the monk seal. Evidence of interactions began to accumulate in 1990, including three hooked seals (included in hookings reported above) and 13 unusual seal wounds thought to have resulted from interactions. In response, NMFS established a permanent Protected Species Zone extending 50 nautical miles around the NWHI and the corridors between the islands in October 1991. Subsequent shore-based observations of seals have found no further evidence of interactions with the longline fishery after establishment of the Protected Species Zone. At present, interactions with protected species are assessed using Federal logbooks and observers (4-5% coverage), which may lack sufficient statistical power to estimate monk seal mortality/serious injury rates from longline

interactions. However, since 1991, there have been no observed or reported interactions of this fishery with monk seals.

There have also been interactions between recreational fisheries and monk seals in both the NWHI and around the main Hawaiian Islands. At least three seals have been hooked at Kure Atoll, but such incidents should no longer occur at this site because the atoll was vacated by the U.S. Coast Guard in 1993. In the main Hawaiian Islands, one seal was found dead in an offshore (non-recreational) gillnet in 1994 and a second seal was found dead with a recreational hook lodged in its esophagus. At least seven other seals have been hooked. Three of these incidents involved hooks used to catch ulua (Caranx spp.). One hooked seal had been translocated from Laysan Island to the main Hawaiian Islands in July 1994. The recent establishment of sport fishing at Midway clearly increases the potential for monk seals to be harmed by hooks at that site.

Table 1. Summary of incidental mortality of Hawaiian monk seals due to commercial and recreational fisheries since 1990 and calculation of annual mortality rate. n/a indicates that sufficient data are not available.

Fishery Name	Years	Range of # of vessels per year	Date type	Range of observer coverage	Total observed mort.	Estimated mort. (in given years)	Mean annual mort.
NWHI lobster	91-99	0-12	Observer Log book	0-100%	0	n/a	n/a
NWHI Bottomfish	91-99	12-17	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a
Pelagic longline	91-99	103-141	Observer Log book	4-5%	0	n/a	n/a
Recreational	91-95	n/a	n/a	n/a	2[†]	n/a	n/a

[†] Data collected incidentally.

Recent interest in the harvest of precious coral in the NWHI represents a potential for future interactions with monk seals. The impact that removal of precious corals might have on monk seal prey resources and foraging habitat is not known. However, recent studies of seals with satellite transmitters and surveys using manned submersibles indicate that some monk seals forage at patches of precious gold corals occurring over 500m in depth (Parrish, pers. comm.). Recruitment of gold coral is very slow (perhaps on the order of 100 years), so there is concern that harvesting could have a long term impact on monk seal foraging habitat. As a result, the Western Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Council has recommended regulations to suspend or set to zero annual quotas for gold coral harvest at specific locations until information on impacts of such harvests on monk seal foraging habitat become available.

Fishery Mortality Rate

Because monk seals continue to die as a result of entanglement in North Pacific fishing debris (likely originating from various countries) and data are unavailable to assess interaction with specific fisheries, one must conclude that the total fishery mortality and serious injury for this stock is greater than 1) zero allowable take under the Endangered Species Act and 2) 10% of the calculated PBR. Therefore, total fishery mortality and serious injury can not be considered to be insignificant and approaching a rate of zero.

Direct fishery interactions with this species remain to be thoroughly evaluated and, therefore, the information above represents only the observed level of interactions. Without further study, an accurate estimate cannot be determined. In addition, interactions may be indirect (i.e., involving competition for prey or consumption of discards from the bottomfish fishery) and, to date, the extent or consequences of such indirect interactions remain the topic of ongoing investigation.

Other Mortality

Since 1982, 22 seals died during rehabilitation efforts; additionally, two died in captivity, two died when captured for translocation, one was euthanized (an aggressive male known to cause mortality), three died during captive research and three died during field research.

Seals have also died after encounters with marine debris from sources other than fisheries. In 1986, a weaned pup died at East Island, French Frigate Shoals, after becoming entangled in wire left when the U.S. Coast Guard abandoned the island three decades earlier. In 1991, a seal died after becoming trapped behind an eroding seawall on Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals. This seawall continues to erode and poses an ongoing threat to the safety of seals and other wildlife.

The only documented case of illegal killing of an Hawaiian monk seal occurred when a resident of Kauai killed an adult female in 1989.

Other sources of mortality which are (or may be) impeding the recovery of this subpopulation include single and multiple male aggression (mobbing), shark predation, poisoning by ciguatoxin or other biotoxins, and disease/parasitism. When multiple males attempt to mount and mate with an adult female or immature animal of either sex, injury or death of the attacked seal often results. Since 1982, at least 67 seals have died or disappeared after suffering multiple male aggression. The resulting increase in female mortality appears to have been a major impediment to recovery at Laysan and Lisianski Islands. Multiple male aggression has also been documented at French Frigate Shoals, Kure Atoll, and Necker Island. Multiple male aggression is thought to be related to an imbalance in the adult sex ratio, with males outnumbering females. In 1994, 22 adult males were removed from Laysan Island, and only three seals are thought to have died from multiple male aggression at this site since their removal (1995-99). Such imbalances in the adult sex ratio are more likely to occur when populations are reduced (Starfield et al. 1995).

In addition to mobbing, aggressive attacks by single adult males have resulted in several monk seal mortalities. This was most notable at French Frigate Shoals in 1997, where at least 8 pups died as a result of adult male aggression. Many more pups were likely killed in the same way but the cause of their deaths could not be confirmed. Two males who had been known to kill pups in 1997 were observed exhibiting aggressive behavior toward pups at the beginning of the 1998 pupping season. These two males were translocated to Johnston Atoll, 870 km to the southwest. Subsequently, mounting injury to pups have decreased.

The incidence of shark-related injury and mortality may have increased in the late 1980s and early 1990s at French Frigate Shoals, but such mortality was probably not the primary cause of the decline at this site (Ragen 1993). However, indications are that shark predation has accounted for a significant portion of pup mortality in the last few years. At French Frigate Shoals in 1999, 17 pups were observed injured by large sharks, and at least 3 were confirmed to have died from shark predation (Johanos and Baker, 2001). Assigning cause of death to shark predation is problematic, as predation events are rarely observable. However, it is believed that as many as 25 pups of a total 92 born at French Frigate Shoals in 1999 were killed by sharks. The potential causes of high pup mortality, including shark predation, disease, male aggression and food limitation are currently being investigated at French Frigate Shoals. Poisoning by ciguatoxin or related toxins may have been the primary cause of the Laysan die-off in 1978, and may have contributed to the high mortality of juvenile seals translocated to Midway Atoll in 1992 and 1993. While virtually all wild monk seals carry parasites after they begin to forage, the role of parasitism in monk seal mortality is unknown. The effect of disease on monk seal demographic trends is also uncertain.

STATUS OF STOCK

In 1976, the Hawaiian monk seal was designated depleted under the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972 and as endangered under the Endangered Species Act of 1973. The species is assumed to be well below its optimum sustainable population (OSP) and, since 1985, has declined approximately 3% per year. Therefore, the Hawaiian monk seal is characterized as a strategic stock.

Habitat Issues

Available data indicate that the substantial decline at French Frigate Shoals was to some degree attributable to lack of available prey and subsequent emaciation and starvation. The two leading hypotheses to explain the lack of prey are 1) the local population reached its carrying capacity in the 1970s and 1980s, and essentially diminished its own food supply, and 2) carrying capacity was simultaneously reduced by changes in oceanographic conditions and a

resulting decrease in productivity (Polovina et al. 1994; Craig and Ragen 2000;). Thus, this subpopulation may have significantly exceeded its carrying capacity, leading to a catastrophic increase in juvenile mortality. In addition, available prey also may have been reduced by competition with the NWHI lobster fishery. Monk seals forage at the four main banks where the fishery has primarily operated: Maro Reef, Gardiner Pinnacles, St. Rogatien Bank, and Necker Island. In 1998, the fishery expanded into areas where monk seal breeding populations are concentrated within the fishery's Area 4. Thus, competition for prey is under investigation. This potential for competition cannot yet be determined, however, because it is not known if lobster is an important component of the monk seal diet. Preliminary research indicates that lobster have identifiable fatty acid signatures, which will potentially make possible an assessment of its importance in the monk seal diet. This promising area of research is being actively pursued.

A second important habitat issue is the management of human activities at Midway Atoll. Historically, human activities have led to the near extinction of the resident monk seal population at Midway both in the late 1800s, and again in the 1960s. The seal population failed to recover in the 1970s and 1980s, but is finally beginning to show some signs of growth due to immigration from nearby sites. Management jurisdiction of Midway Atoll has been transferred from the U.S. Navy to the Fish and Wildlife Service. The Fish and Wildlife Service maintains a refuge station at Midway Atoll by cooperating with a commercial aircraft company that uses the runway on Sand Island (the largest island at Midway Atoll), and support its operations, in part, by establishing an on-site eco-tourism destination. Tourist activities include a range of land-based and marine recreational activities (e.g., scuba diving and sport fishing), as well as harbor services to visiting vessels. As the tourism venture develops, so does a potential conflict of interest. The economic success of the venture may depend on the nature and variety of human activities or privileges allowed at the site. Importantly, those activities that are intended to enhance the Midway experience may be disruptive or detrimental to the refuge and its wildlife. The issue is whether such potential conflicts can be identified and resolved in a manner that allows for continuation of the ecotourism venture but does not impede monk seal recovery. The Fish and Wildlife Service and NMFS are working cooperatively to ensure that human activities do not impede recovery at this site.

Another important habitat issue is the degrading seawall at Tern Island, French Frigate Shoals. Tern Island is the site of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife refuge station, and is one of two sites in the NWHI accessible by aircraft. The island and the runway have played a key role in efforts to study the local monk seal population, and to mitigate its severe and ongoing decline. During World War II, the U.S. Navy enlarged the island to accommodate the runway. A sheet-pile seawall was constructed to maintain the modified shape of the island. Degradation of the seawall is creating entrapment hazards for seals and other wildlife, and is threatening to erode the runway. Erosion of the sea wall has also raised concerns about the potential release of toxic wastes into the aquatic environment. The loss of the runway could lead to the closure of the Fish and Wildlife Service station at the site and would thereby reduce on-site management of the refuge. The loss of the runway and refuge station would also hinder research and management efforts to recover the monk seal population.

A fourth important habitat issue involves entanglement in marine debris. Marine debris is removed from the beaches and entangled seals during annual population assessment activities at the main reproductive sites. Efforts to remove potentially entangling marine debris from the reefs surrounding haulout sites utilized by monk seal are ongoing. In 1996, efforts commenced to assess and remove potentially entangling marine debris from reefs surrounding haulout sites utilized by monk seals. Preliminary surveys suggest a very large number of nets are fouled on nearshore reefs in the NWHI, and may pose a serious threat to seals in these areas. During 1996-1999 debris survey and removal efforts, 35,000 kg of derelict net and other debris were removed from the coral reef habitat at French Frigate Shoals, Pearl and Hermes Reef, Lisianski Island and Midway Atoll (Donohue et al. 2000, Donohue et al. in press).

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