

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905
BETHESDA, MD 20814

12 March 2007

William T. Hogarth, Ph.D.
Assistant Administrator for Fisheries
National Marine Fisheries Service
1315 East-West Highway, Room 14564
Silver Spring, Maryland 20910

Dear Dr. Hogarth:

As you know, for many years the Hawaiian monk seal has been a serious concern to both the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Marine Mammal Commission. In our view, its continued decline in recent years has brought the species to a crisis stage. Many others familiar with the Hawaiian monk seal situation share our view.

The Service's Pacific Islands Regional Office, working with the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team, recently completed a draft revised recovery plan. A great deal of dedicated work went into the preparation of that plan. Nonetheless, we are concerned that it does not give sufficient priority to recovery efforts that are most likely to reverse the species' ongoing decline.

The Service has put a significant amount of effort into its monk seal recovery program. Since the formation of the Pacific Islands Region and the Pacific Islands Fisheries Science Center, management and research efforts have been increased, especially with regard to monk seal reoccupation of the main Hawaiian Islands. We are encouraged by those efforts, as well as by new protections for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands that include much essential monk seal habitat. However, the "bottom line" is that the number of Hawaiian monk seals continues to decline, and the population today is more imperiled than ever before. We believe that additional recovery efforts must be focused in four key areas:

- Enhancing the survival of young female seals through a captive care program (temporary captive maintenance of seals to enhance nutritional status);
- Mitigating the loss of pups to shark predation, particularly at French Frigate Shoals;
- Removing marine debris to prevent seal entanglement; and
- Facilitating continued growth of the monk seal population in the main Hawaiian Islands.


Each of these areas has been addressed in some fashion in the past. However, they all involve ongoing, complex issues for which more could and should be done. For example, poor survival of pups and juveniles has been a problem since the late 1980s. A range of recovery measures were attempted and met with both successes and failures, but at present there is no clear strategy for building on that experience and putting in place the type of recovery program needed to stem the associated loss of reproductive potential.

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The Marine Mammal Commission recognizes that the Service has had to address a great many marine mammal research and management issues with limited resources. Successful efforts to recover the Hawaiian monk seal will require the resources and cooperation of a number of agencies and organizations at federal, state, and local levels. We believe it is time to bring together top-level decision-makers from the involved agencies and organizations to develop a more effective course of action to address the problems mentioned here.

The Commission would be pleased to help organize and facilitate such a meeting. Commission Chairman John Reynolds and I would very much like the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these ideas. Please let us know when you are available for such a meeting.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Timothy J. Ragen". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Timothy J. Ragen, Ph.D.
Executive Director

Cc: Samuel Pooley
William Robinson
Members of the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team