Pacific Islands Region
Marine Mammal Response Network Activity Update

January - April 2011

#17

NOAA FISHERIES SERVICE

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Monk Seals

Two pups born on North Larsen's Beach

On April 25, 2011, a Kauai Conservation Hui volunteer spotted the first Kauai pup of the year on North Larsen's Beach. RK22's pup, "PK1" (Kauai pup #1 for 2011), was discovered in the early morning and was believed to be only hours old. The mother, RK22, was observed just the day before without a pup. Two days later, RH58 gave birth to her fifth pup, PK2, in the same protective enclosure originally set up for RK22 and her pup. With four pups under her belt, RH58 has a good history of successfully birthing and weaning her offspring.

Volunteers and staff were also pleased to report that RK22, who had abandoned KP2 and another pup previous to that, was displaying normal maternal behavior. She was observed nursing and protecting her pup from the start. Despite the positive outlook, NOAA Fisheries Service staff remained cautiously optimistic hoping that the addition of another mom and pup pair, or any other disturbance, would not cause her to abandon this pup.

So far, RK22 has continued her attentiveness to her pup, remaining extremely aware of human activity. She even remained protective as RK05, an adult male, visited the area. This is a stark contrast from her behavior with KP2 (Ho'ailona), her second documented and abandoned pup, who was found alone, suckling on rocks. RK22 returned soon after accompanied by a large male who displayed threatening behaviors and attacked the pup. RK22 made no attempt to protect her pup, KP2, and it was subsequently brought in to captivity to be hand reared.

Having two mother pup pairs in such close proximity is a rarely observed occurrence in the main Hawaiian Islands, and to observe these two mothers nursing their pups side by side is a special treat. Kauai volunteers and staff will continue to devote hundreds of hours to monitor the pups, even after weaning, to ensure they remain undisturbed during this critical time in their development.

The first two Kauai pups of the year on North Larsen's Beach

Hawaiian Monk Seals

NOAA Fisheries assesses the condition of an injured monk seal

On April 22, 2011, NOAA Fisheries Service staff received a report of a monk seal at Davidson's Beach on Kauai with an injury above its left rear flipper. Volunteers were immediately dispatched and arrived just after dark to document R6FQ's injury. R6FQ is a juvenile male, of unknown origin, who was first observed on Kauai in January 2011.

Although injuries such as these appear rather severe, there have been many documented cases is which large wounds healed remarkably fast. As hoped, R6FQ's wound began to show signs of normal healing within the next few weeks.

Volunteers and staff will continue to keep a close eye over R6FQ in order to closely document his behavior, mobility, progress of healing and overall health status.

R6FQ was documented with this injury on April 22, 2011

Photo taken on May 5, 2011 showing the progress of R6FQ's healing

9th semiannual seal count April 16th, 2011

	April 28 2007	October 20 2007	April 19 2008	October 18 2008	April 20 2009	October 17 2009	April 17 2010	October 16 2010	April 16 2011
Kauai	13	6	13	14	16	14	5	12	6
Oahu	6	5	14	9	7	9	8	12	12
Molokai	19	7	8	15	11	9	12	4	18
Maui/Lanai	1	3	0	5	0	4	4	1	3
Kahoolawe	2	1	2	0	1	2	2	3	2
Island of Hawaii	0	1	1	5	0	1	1	1	2
Total	**41**	**23**	**38**	**48**	**35**	**39**	**32**	**33**	**42**

Results of the 9th semiannual monk seal count.

**Note: Niihau also participated in the count, but was only able to cover a portion of the island in which 16 seals were counted. NOAA Fisheries Service wishes to thank the Robinson family and Niihau residents for their support and partnership*

Cetaceans

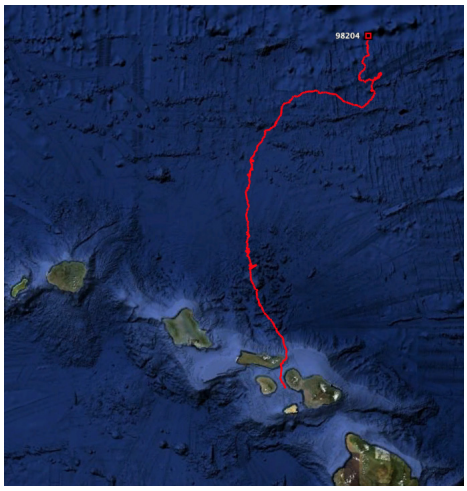
Response to juvenile sei whale entangled off Lahaina, Maui

On March 18, 2011, NOAA Fisheries Service received a report of an entangled whale off Lahaina, Maui. The Hawaii Whale Research Foundation (HWRF) reported the animal, a subadult sei whale (*Balaenoptera borealis*), with heavy gauge line entangled around its tailstock. The line trailed approximately 30-feet to a bundle of gear. Upon closer examination, it became apparent that the line was heavily fouled with growth of gooseneck barnacles, making the line appear to be four to six inches in diameter and light-colored. Based on the nature of the entanglement (a complete wrap around the animal) and the impact to the animal (emaciated and in poor condition), the entanglement was considered life threatening and a response was mounted.

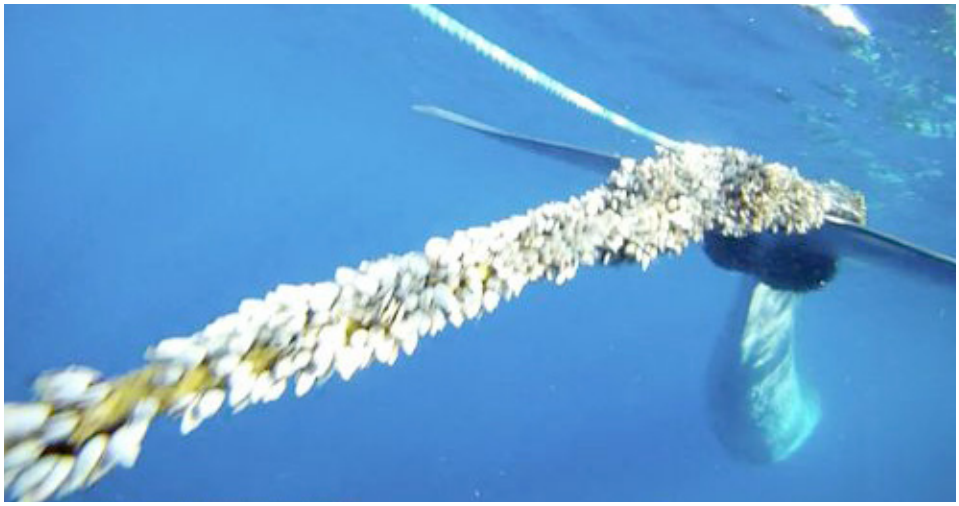
The Hawaiian Islands Entanglement Response Network, an authorized network of federal and state agencies, working with professional mariners (e.g. tour industry, whale researchers and fishermen) was able to respond making several cutting attempts, one of which may have been successful, with a small amount of daylight left and under rough sea conditions. However, the animal remained entangled in gear. With little light remaining, the animal was tagged by tethering a telemetry buoy to the trailing gear, hoping that weather conditions the following day would provide opportunity for further response. Unfortunately, the animal rounded the east end of Molokai and continued traveling as far as 280 nautical miles (nm) north of Maui over the next few weeks.

Track and modeling work performed by the International Pacific Research Center, School of Ocean and Earth Science and Technology (University of Hawaii at Manoa) confirmed that the telemetry buoy was still attached to the whale. By April 30, 2011, the whale had traveled a minimum of 650 nm since the telemetry buoy was first attached 43 days prior.

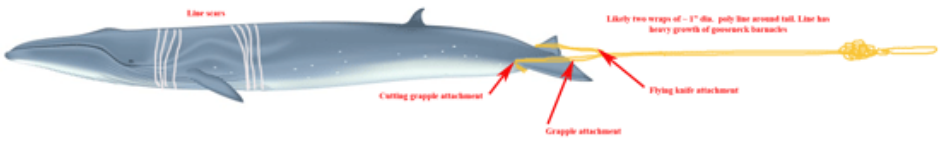
Sei whales have been observed, but are seldom seen in Hawaiian waters. This effort represents the first response to an entangled sei whale since the Hawaiian Islands Entanglement Response Network was formed in 2002. Close monitoring of the GPS data from the attached telemetry buoy will continue in hopes that the animal will provide an opportunity for a follow-up response.



Day 21: Track of tagged sei whale and detached telemetry buoy show animal over 250 nm north of Maui



Flying knife attached to loop of gear around tail (HIHWNMS)



Sperm Whale Stranding in Waiopae Tide Pools

On March 25, 2011, a large whale carcass was reported outside the reef at the Waiopae tidepools on the Island of Hawaii. After several days, the decomposed adult sperm whale carcass worked its way onto the inner reef shelf where it would remain for more than a month. The Waiopae tide pools have been designated as a State Marine Life Conservation District, and is a popular area for residents and visitors to swim and snorkel.

UH Hilo's Marine Mammal Response Network (HMMRN) spent many hours posting signs and conducting community outreach to educate people about whale strandings and the potential health and safety hazards of being around a large decomposing carcass. Despite these warnings, there were numerous reports of individuals scavenging the carcass for parts such as bone and teeth, all of which are protected under the United States Marine Mammal Protection Act. Fortunately, NOAA's Office of Law Enforcement and the State Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement were able to confiscate some of these items and place them in the protective custody of UH Hilo, a NOAA stranding agreement letter holder.

Soon after, it became apparent that humans were not the only ones scavenging off of the sperm whale carcass. During one of their routine trips out to the whale, HMMRN volunteers observed a seal gnawing on a portion of the carcass. This is the first confirmed report of this type of behavior in Hawaiian monk seals.

NOAA Fisheries Service staff and Kehaulani Watson, Marine Mammal Response Network Cultural Liaison, have also been working with community members, local Hawaiian cultural leaders and state partners to decide upon the best course of action. Currently, removal options are very limited due to the inaccessibility of the site to heavy equipment or boats.

Hawaiian monk seal investigating the decaying sperm whale carcass at Waiopae tidepools on the Island of Hawaii

Bottlenose dolphin calf stranding on Kauai

On February 23, 2011, a freshly dead dolphin was reported in the shallow waters at Lydgate Beach Park. NOAA Fisheries Service staff, volunteers and several local residents removed the dolphin from the water and placed it on the beach. The dolphin was a young *Tursiops truncatus* (bottlenose dolphin) with several wounds on the body consistent with cookie cutter shark bites, as well as other superficial injuries on the animal's melon, dorsal fin and fluke. A local Hawaiian cultural practitioner led the team in a pule (prayer) for the dolphin as two Hawaiian families, eight visitors and volunteers joined hands in a circle around the deceased animal. The bottlenose dolphin was then shipped to Hawaii Pacific University (HPU) on Oahu for necropsy.

A cause of death could not be determined from the external examination or the gross necropsy, but it did reveal that the animal was emaciated and had nursed from its mother within one hour prior to death. The pathology report is still pending and may reveal more into the death of this animal.

This bottlenose dolphin calf had nursed from its mother just before it died

Images From the Field

The first Molokai pup of the year was born on Kalaupapa sometime between 2/21/11 and 2/22/11. The mother is RQ21. She did not pup last year and has been seen on Maui several times but not often.