

The Hawaiian Monk Seal Conservation at Sea Life Park

The Hawaiian Monk Seal (known in the Hawaiian language as *`Ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua*) is the most important and precious native Hawaiian species on display at Sea Life Park. Only an estimated 1,100 of these beautiful animals are left in the wild; and only four are displayed in captivity in Hawai‘i. Among these are the three that we have at Sea Life Park.

Sea Life Park has received permission to display these seals from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration’s (NOAA) Marine Fisheries Program, with which we work very closely to ensure that these special animals are cared for in accordance with the strictest guidelines as an endangered species.

In the wild Hawaiian monk seals are found predominantly in the uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands; however, they do occur in the main Hawaiian islands and you may be fortunate enough to see one along some of O‘ahu’s beaches. These animals should be quietly observed from a distance. Typically, a NOAA volunteer will be nearby to ensure that the animal is not disturbed by the public.

The Park received its first Hawaiian Monk Seal in 1989 as a part of a NOAA program called Headstart that took underweight or abandoned seals from the wild, nourished them, and then released them. The current habitat was built for the seals under this program; and the Park started with four seals, three of which you see today.

Our seals, two males and one female, are probably about 25 years old, based on the estimate of their age of three years when we acquired them as pups. The life span of the Hawaiian Monk Seal is about 30 years in the wild, so our seals are in the “autumn” years of their lives.

The diet of the Hawaiian Monk Seal in the wild consists of bottom-dwelling and reef fish, eel, octopus, squid and crustaceans. Because we are unable to secure this type of food in sufficient quantities, we have developed a special diet for our seals that we feed them three times a day: seven to twelve pounds of mixed capelin (a type of smelt), herring and squid for each seal. In the wild they will dive to a depth of up to 400 feet; however, here, with a steady food supply, they have no need to do so. Our seals are thriving at a current body weight averaging 375 to 465 pounds.

The Hawaiian Monk Seal does not form a colony in the wild; and here at Sea Life Park they also tend to keep to themselves, spending their time lolling about in the water or hauling out to the shore and sleeping in the sun. You will notice that our female Hawaiian Monk Seal resides in a habitat with a small harbor seal from California that has been here at Sea Life Park for over 32 years. (The occasional aggressive behavior of the males makes this a prudent housing decision while also providing some company for the female seal.) In addition, it is required by our permit under the Endangered Species Act and the 1972 Marine Mammal Protection Act to keep the males and females separate.

Our seals enjoy three saltwater ponds—about 15 feet deep—with a sandy beach on one side. A flow-through pumping system pumps fresh water from the ocean through the habitat every day; and the water is tested weekly for bacteria. The water comes from the three pumps that pump about 12 million gallons of fresh seawater each day through the park to refresh all the ponds and tanks. Chemicals are never added.

Our permit, called an “Enhancement Permit,” requires the Park to educate our visitors about the importance of our endangered Monk Seals; therefore, each day at 2:00 p.m. a lecture is given at the exhibit about the seals. Also, visitors may find it interesting to observe the training that occurs for the seals three times each day. This training is not to teach them stunts or tricks, but, rather, to enable the seals to come out of the water willingly for examination and treatment required for their health care. Our Hawaiian Monk Seals are well cared for by our staff veterinarian, who has extensive marine mammal experience.

Once a year a Hawaiian Monk Seal will molt, losing both its very coarse fur and its skin. At this time, algae will actually grow on the fur and the animal may look rather unsightly. This is normal. In one to three weeks the molting is completed and a beautiful, sleek new coat of fur is revealed with a light black/gray top coat and a beautiful silvery belly.

A Hawaiian Monk Seal has never been born in captivity, thus we do not know a great deal about their gestation period, but it is estimated at about a year, based on observations in the wild. The mother seal nurses her pup for about three months and then departs, leaving the baby seal to fend for itself. During the nursing period the mother will return to the sea to find food and leave the pup to fend for itself. The pup then has the daunting task of figuring out what to eat and how to catch its prey. During this weaning period the pup will steadily lose weight, only reaching about 100 pounds at one year of age.

Currently, NOAA has several projects to aid the recovery and growth of these fascinating animals that include an annual evaluation of the population in all islands, translocation of weaned pups to areas of higher survival probability, removal of aggressive males that may cause mortality of females and juveniles, investigation of health and disease factors and removal of marine debris from coral reefs.

We hope you enjoy observing one of the great treasures of Hawaii’s natural world: the endangered Hawaiian Monk Seal. If you would like to support our monk seals, we would greatly appreciate any donation, which would be utilized for their care, habitat improvement or educational efforts to inform people about the importance of saving this important species.

Our Hawaiian Monk Seals are kept under permit number 898-1764-02.