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Hawaiian Monk Seal

[Illustration of a seal on sand.]

Common Name: Hawaiian monk seal

Scientific Name: *Neomonachus schauinslandi*

Type: Marine mammal

Diet: Carnivore

Life span: 25–30 years

Size: 1.8–2.1 meters (6–7 feet)

Weight: 180–270 kilograms (400–600 pounds)

[Illustration of a globe showing the Pacific Ocean and surrounding landmasses; a magnified inset zooms in on the Hawaiian Islands.]

The Hawaiian monk seal is endemic to the Hawaiian Islands, meaning it is not found elsewhere in the world.

Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

- Kaua‘i
- O‘ahu
- Hawai‘i

[Illustration of a large and small seal laying together on a beach in front of a rocky cliff.]

Most monk seals are found on the smaller, more remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. They use the beaches on these islands to rest and raise pups, which are born in the spring and summer.

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Hawaiian monk seal pups are with their mothers for their first 5–6 weeks. During this time, they often swim together in the nearshore waters.

[Illustration of three seals; the one on the left is labeled Week 1 and is laying on the beach, the middle one is labeled Week 3 and is sitting up facing the ocean, and the one on the right is labeled Week 7 and is diving into the water.]

After their mothers leave, juveniles move into their marine environments on their own.

[Illustration of a mother seal and juvenile in water. The mother is facing a prey animal labeled with its Hawaiian and English names: mūhe‘e/squid.]

Unlike sea lions and other seals, Hawaiian monk seals tend to be solitary and do not live in colonies.

Hawaiian monk seals prey on a variety of fish, squids and octopuses, eels, and crustaceans (crabs, shrimps, and lobsters).

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Because monk seals eat a variety of prey items, they prevent any one prey species from becoming dominant. This helps promote more diverse marine communities.

[Illustration of a seal in water facing five prey labeled with their Hawaiian and English names: pāpa'i/crab, 'ōpae/shrimp, he'e/octopus, puhi/eel, and i'a/fish.]

The Hawaiian name for this monk seal is 'ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua, loosely meaning “dog running in the surf.” This seal is considered to have cultural and spiritual importance to native Hawaiian communities and is a symbol of the unique marine ecosystems of the Hawaiian Islands.

[Illustration of four people looking towards a seal in the surf labeled 'ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua.]

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While there may have been several thousand Hawaiian monk seals in the 1950s, current (2022) estimates suggest that there are only about 1,600 left in the wild.

[Illustration of a seal laying in the sand and a graph from NOAA plotting the abundance of seals over nine years. The data shows a general increasing trend starting in 2013 with an abundance of just under 1,300 to an abundance of just over 1,600 in 2022.]

There are many threats that have contributed to the decline in the number of Hawaiian monk seals, and most are associated with human activities.

[Three illustrations of threats to the Hawaiian monk seal: the first shows two seals laying on the beach and in the surf with people and a city in the background, the second shows a seal swimming in water that contains a variety of trash, and the third shows the seal underwater on one side of a large net with many smaller fish on the other side of the net.]

Learn more about the human activities that impact the monk seals and how people can help preserve the species.

[An illustration of four people: a person wearing a shirt that says “research” is holding a clipboard, a person holding a large net, a person holding two plastic water bottles, and another person holding a cat.]