

# Hawaiian Islands named habitat for endangered seal

12 June 2009, By JAYMES SONG , Associated Press Writer

(AP) -- The federal government on Friday will significantly expand the critical habitat for endangered Hawaiian monk seals to include beaches and waters of the main Hawaiian Islands, officials said.

Environmentalists say the added habitat is needed to reverse the plight of the monk seals, which are among the most endangered marine mammals in the world with fewer than 1,200 remaining.

Previously, the critical habitat was limited to the remote and largely uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, where it was first established in 1986.

The enhanced designation means greater protection of seal habitat under the Endangered Species Act. It does not affect or restrict access to Hawaii's beaches or fishing. But the designation limits federal government activities, which must undergo reviews to ensure they do not harm the seal or the habitat.

The announcement to be published Friday in the Federal Register is the result of a petition filed a year ago by the Center for Biological Diversity, KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance, and Ocean Conservancy.

"It will give this species a fighting chance," said Vicki Cornish, wildlife policy director at Ocean Conservancy. "When we protect critical habitat for monk seals, we are also protecting the larger ocean ecosystem on which we all depend."

Miyoko Sakashita, an attorney with the Center for Biological Diversity, said the seals are "teetering on the edge of extinction ... and the forces are against them with rising sea levels flooding their beaches, derelict fishing gear entangling them and foraging grounds running dry."

She called the expanded protection "essential" for

the recovery of the seals.

Environmental groups point to the Caribbean monk seal as proof of what could happen to their Hawaiian relatives.

A year ago, the National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service confirmed Caribbean monk seals were extinct. The seals once had a population of more than 250,000, but they became easy game for hunters because they often rested, gave birth or nursed their pups on beaches. The last confirmed sighting was in 1952.

The Hawaiian monk seal population is declining at a rate of about 4 percent annually, according to NOAA. The agency predicts the population could fall below 1,000 in the next three to four years.

When the numbers of any species fall to such small numbers, the population gets unstable and is more vulnerable to threats like disease.

"We cannot afford the extinction of a creature so sacred in Hawaiian culture and endemic to these islands," said Marti Townsend, KAHEA's program director. "And we cannot expect to save the seals without meaningfully protecting critical habitat."

*©2009 The Associated Press. All rights reserved. This material may not be published, broadcast, rewritten or redistributed.*

APA citation: Hawaiian Islands named habitat for endangered seal (2009, June 12) retrieved 6 December 2021 from <https://phys.org/news/2009-06-hawaiian-islands-habitat-endangered.html>

*This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.*