

FAST FACTS:

Hawaiian Monk Seal

(*Monachus schauinslandi*)

The Hawaiian name for the monk seal is 'ilio-holo-i-ka-uaua. The Hawaiian monk seal population is at its lowest level in recorded history and it is estimated that about only 1,100 to 1,200 individuals are alive today.¹



JAMES WATT

BILL CURTSINGER
NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC

APPEARANCE

Adult monk seals have dark gray to brown backs, and light gray to yellow bellies. They grow to an average size of about six feet long and 440 pounds, though adult females are generally larger than males. Monk seal pups are jet black and weigh 25 to 30 pounds at birth.² The monk seal's name comes from the folds of skin around its neck that look like a monk's hood, and from the fact that seals are solitary, like monks.³ Monk seals typically live 25 to 30 years.⁴ Monk seals are the only tropical seal species in the world and are true seals and not sea lions. True seals have no ear flaps; unlike sea lions, they cannot prop themselves up on their front flippers; and they propel themselves while swimming with their rear flippers and not their front flippers (like sea lions).



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DIET

A monk seal's diet consists primarily of reef fish, squid, octopus, eels and crustaceans (such as spiny lobster, shrimp and crabs).⁵

HABITAT

Hawaiian monk seals are found only in the Hawaiian Islands and, for the most part, in the remote Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). Most seals remain at their birth atolls (coral islands with lagoons) for life, though some may visit nearby atolls.⁶



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Monk seals spend one-third of their time at sea, but they also haul out on beaches, coral reef islands and rocks to rest. When giving birth, females look for sandy beaches surrounded by shallow water⁷ where there is not a lot of human activity.⁸

BREEDING



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Female monk seals usually mature between the ages of five and nine years. Mating occurs in the water, and males bite the backs of females, often tearing their skin and blubber (heavy fat that covers their body). While most pups are born between March and August, they can be born at any time

of year. Females nurse their pups for five to six weeks. While nursing causes the mother seal to lose weight, her rich milk allows her pups to gain weight rapidly.⁹ Nursing females can become quite agitated when they see humans, even to the point of abandoning their pups.¹⁰

THREATS

Seals can become entangled in various forms of marine debris, especially derelict fishing gear, which often causes injuries, infections or drowning. Inadequate food supply also threatens Hawaiian monk seals since they eat many of the same fish that people eat, including the spiny lobster. Monk seals also fall prey to sharks, disease and each other; male monk seals are quite aggressive. Sea level changes, which threaten seals' habitat, pose an additional survival challenge.¹¹



RAY BOLAND / NOAA

REFERENCES

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- ⁶ *Ibid*
- ⁷ NOAA Fisheries, Office of Protected Resources, Hawaiian Monk Seal, <http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/pr/species/mammals/pinnipeds/hawaiianmonkseal.htm> (accessed May 28, 2010).
- ⁸ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, Marine Life of Midway Atoll, Hawaiian Monk Seal, <http://www.fws.gov/midway/monk.html> (accessed May 28, 2010).
- ⁹ *Ibid*
- ¹⁰ Marine Conservation Biology Institute, Hawaiian Monk Seal Facts, http://www.mcbi.org/what/what_pdfs/sealFacts.pdf (accessed May 28, 2010).
- ¹¹ U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Pacific Islands Fish and Wildlife Office, Endangered Species in the Pacific Islands, Hawaiian Monk Seal, <http://www.fws.gov/pacificislands/fauna/Hlmonkseal.html> (accessed May 28, 2010).