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Monk Seals with Health and Safety Issues: How NOAA Fisheries decides to intervene



Monk seals with health and safety issues have been in the news recently and there is public interest regarding how decisions are made regarding if and when physical intervention is appropriate. We are sharing the article below to provide some background on our monk seal intervention decision-making.

As NOAA Fisheries works to protect and recover endangered Hawaiian monk seals, we often need to decide whether or not to directly intervene with seals that have health or safety issues.

We have faced this type of decision recently on Oahu with a hooked male seal (RO40) observed at Kaena Point and with a possibly pregnant seal (R912) frequenting a potentially hazardous canal area in Maili.

In both of these cases, we have used a process of dynamic risk assessment to guide our decisions to intervene or not. Dynamic risk assessment is a technique used by emergency responders, such as fire fighters, who are required to make decisions in situations where working conditions and associated risks are rapidly changing. Risk assessment for monk seals is built on a thorough understanding of the biology, physiology and hardiness of seals and decades of experience handling seals in a variety of situations and environments.

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In the case of the R912 and her preference for foraging and resting in canals, dynamic risk assessment helped us decide how and when intervention was best for the seal and her potential future pup. The canal is in close proximity to a developed residential area where the seals could be exposed to entanglement hazards and disease risks, as well as close interactions with humans that could interfere with the pup's successful development into a wild adult seal. In this case, we have taken action to intervene because risks of our displacement interventions are minimal compared to the greater risks of leaving the seals exposed to the hazards in the canal area. We have used portable physical barriers, called "crowding boards," and other displacement techniques to encourage R912 to stay out of a canal. Given the challenges of modifying a wild seal's behavior, we may not be successful in keeping R912 from using the canal over the long term, but our assessment indicated that making a concerted effort was worth the risks. This process will also help inform our future decision making process for other seals in similar situations.

In the case of the hooked seal at Kaena Point, we assessed that the risk of the hooking injury was relatively low given the superficial nature of the hooking. Meanwhile, there were considerable safety risks, including head injury, associated with capturing and restraining the seal on the hard, rocky shoreline where the seal was observed. Thus, our risk assessment pointed against intervention. As each day passed, we monitored the situation and re-assessed the risks, but there was never an opportunity to safely attempt a hook removal intervention. Our assessment process continued daily until the hook dislodged without our direct intervention and without further injury to the seal.

Risk factors we consider in our intervention decisions include environmental conditions such as weather, accessibility, and safety hazards such as rocks and waves. Other factors are related to the seal itself, including its age, body condition and health, type and severity of injury, etc. Human safety is also considered when the intervention requires hands on work - monk seals are wild carnivores weighing as much as 600 lbs. Handling these animals, especially when they are injured, comes with serious risks that must be considered. These and other risk factors can change on a daily basis – and we must therefore conduct new assessments every time these factors change and then adjust our intervention plans accordingly.

When our risk assessment indicates that "no intervention" is the best course of action, it may seem as if we don't care enough for the animal. Much of the decision making is done behind the scene, so it is understandable that some may not appreciate all the time and careful consideration we put into the decision process. We share the same concerns the public has for a seal when it is injured or in distress. We feel the same frustration, maybe even more so, when action can't be taken to help. But ultimately, our actions represent what we believe to be best for the seal.

Our understanding of the risks is based on some tough experiences in the past, including a seal that hit her head on a rock and died during an intervention attempt. We have learned tough lessons that the best intentions are not enough, and rescue attempts with a large wild animal can carry significant dangers that exceed the dangers the animal already faces. On the other hand, we are not at all hesitant to intervene when we believe it is appropriate. A recent study showed that as much as 30% of the monk seal population is alive today because of our interventions.

We appreciate the public's understanding and support of our efforts. The public can play an essential and complementary role by reporting seals that appear in need of help. Our first reports of seals with health and safety issues are quite often received from volunteers, fishermen and concerned citizens. Our toll-free hour monk seal reporting hotline can be reached 24 hours a day by calling: 1-888-256-9840.