

Marine Conservation Institute * National Wildlife Federation * Conservation Council for Hawai'i *
Monk Seal Foundation * KAHEA: The Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance *
Moloka'i Community Service Council * Kai Palaoa * Hawai'i Wildlife Fund *
Kure Atoll Conservancy * Maui Tomorrow Foundation * Hawai'i's Thousand Friends *
The North Shore Community Land Trust * Keep the North Shore Country * Hui Aloha Aina Momona *
Ka Iwi Coalition * Livable Hawai'i Kai Hui * Turtle Island Restoration Network *
The Wildlife Society Hawai'i Chapter * Hawai'i National Marine Sanctuary Foundation *
Hawai'i Interfaith Power and Light * National Aquarium * Center for Biological Diversity *
Marine Mammal Center * The Marine Mammal Physiology Project *
Virgin Islands Conservation Society * Sociedad Ornitológica Puertorriqueña

The Honorable Mazie K. Hirono
United States Senate
B-40E Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington DC 20510

The Honorable Colleen Hanabusa
United States House of Representatives
238 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Brian Schatz
United States Senate
G11 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Tulsi Gabbard
United States House of Representatives
502 Cannon House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

April 2, 2013

Dear Senators Hirono and Schatz & Representatives Hanabusa and Gabbard:

Aloha. On behalf of our organizations, consisting of 26 local and national organizations representing 4,126,166 members from Hawai'i and across the US, we encourage the Hawai'i delegation to support federal funding for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) to recover the critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Hawaiian monk seals are the greatest hope to preserving the genus *Monachus*. The Caribbean monk seal is extinct and the Mediterranean monk seal is also critically endangered, with less than 500 individuals remaining. The Hawaiian monk seal is the only marine mammal endemic to the US and Hawai'i, and is in danger of extinction like the Caribbean monk seal if NOAA is not given the resources needed to implement the monk seal recovery plan and recover the population.

While most of the seal population suffers from steep declines in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, a small subpopulation of seals in the main Hawaiian Islands is increasing, which is promising for the future of the species. However, as this subpopulation continues to grow, we expect more human-seal interactions, many of which can be fatal, will occur with greater frequency. Thus, it is critical for the survival of the seal that we, as a community, develop a culture of co-existence. It is important to educate island residents and visitors to live in harmony with the seals.

Unfortunately, we are concerned that the circulation of false information by a few individuals may be connected to the increasing number of harmful human-seal interactions. A vigorous education and outreach campaign would aid in countering misperceptions in the community and reinforce that the

monk seal is an important part of Hawai'i's history. Indeed, the recovery of the Hawaiian monk seal can only be an asset for the health of Hawai'i's ocean ecosystem and the well-being of its people.

NOAA's Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Plan identifies funding needs totaling \$36 million over five years, or approximately \$7 million per year to reduce shark predation, provide emergency care of injured or malnourished seals and seal pups, remove hazardous debris, and regulate human interactions with seals, to name a few. We were encouraged that funding for the Hawaiian monk seal base program increased to \$5.7 million in 2009 and \$5.5 million in 2010. However, we are concerned that funding has severely decreased in recent years (a level as low as \$2.7 million in 2011), disproportionately when compared to other marine mammal species under NOAA's jurisdiction. If we are going to prevent the extinction of these monk seals, it must be a priority to fully fund the recovery program.

Lower funding levels over the past two fiscal years have already severely impacted recovery efforts by severely reducing field camps essential for population monitoring and seal protection; hampering critical community liaison efforts to explore and explain the importance of the monk seal in Native Hawaiian culture; removing specialists to eliminate predatory sharks; and limiting research programs developing mitigation measures for fisheries interactions and other human-seal interactions. A recent report by NOAA indicates that 30% of the seals alive today are due to NOAA and partner recovery interventions.

Additionally, NOAA provides funds to states to implement priority recovery actions for marine species listed under the Endangered Species Act through its Species Recovery Grants to States Program. The Hawaiian monk seal is one such species currently benefiting from a Species Recovery Grant. The state complements federal recovery efforts by responding to monk seal emergencies, promoting use of less harmful fishing gear, and conducting education and outreach at local schools, beaches, and fishing tournaments. The overall Species Recovery Grants to States Program peaked at \$15 million in 2010, but due to the ongoing federal budget crisis, funding shrank to less than \$3 million in 2012. Hawai'i's current grant of \$1 million over three years concludes July 2013. If the funding pattern continues, all federal financial assistance to the State of Hawai'i to help people co-exist with the seal is in jeopardy.

In order to address the critical need for increased education and outreach to stakeholders and deal with increased harmful human-seal interactions, we urge your unified support for the appropriation of \$5.7 million for the Hawaiian Monk Seal Line as a step toward the \$7 a year million recommended in the recovery plan, and \$3.3 million for NOAA's Species Recovery Grants to States Program in 2014.

Thank you for your continued support in the effort to recover and protect our treasured seal, and Hawai'i's official state mammal.

Sincerely,

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