



Hawaiian Islands Eyed for Endangered Seal Habitat

Main islands of 50th US state eyed as critical habitat for endangered Hawaiian monk seals

By Jaymes Song
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The federal government said Friday it will revise the critical habitat for endangered Hawaiian monk seals for the first time in 21 years, which is likely to significantly expand the protection area to include beaches and waters of the main Hawaiian Islands.

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 designated in 1986 and revised two years later.

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.

A seven-page "finding" 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. The finding is the government's report on why it believes a revision is necessary.

"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."

The three groups say the expansion to the main islands will happen.

However, Lance Smith, a biologist with the protected resources division of National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, said it wasn't a done deal yet, since there are still several steps before new habitat area is designated. They include a proposed rule on where the habitat in the main islands should be located. After that, public comment will be taken.

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, NOAA's Fisheries Service confirmed Caribbean monk seals were extinct. The seals once had a population of more than



Main islands of nation's 50th state named critical habitat for endangered Hawaiian monk seals. (The Image Bank/Getty Images)

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."