

We Can Save Corals and Monk Seals and Have A Fishery, Too

By [Miyoko Sakashita](#) 02/15/2013

Editor's Note: *The following community voice was submitted in response to the article [Hawaii Fishermen in Uproar About Cascade of Environmental Protections](#).*

On the surface, it may seem like there's a lot of disagreement about how best to save Hawaiian monk seals and corals from extinction, especially when it comes to the fishing community.

But sometimes lost in the discussion is this: We all depend on, and value, coral reefs and healthy marine ecosystems. We can save them in a way that will benefit us all, including fishermen.

Hawaiian watermen have told me that their fishing is guided by a principle of taking only enough and of taking care of the ocean and coral reefs. We're coming from the same place. And I also understand the fears of the fishing community. I want to take a moment to provide some answers about what protecting corals and monk seal critical habitat under the Endangered Species Act really means – and what it doesn't.

First, protecting monk seals' critical habitat will not limit public access to areas. It's a legal designation that acts as a planning tool requiring careful review of federally funded or permitted projects to determine whether the activity will destroy or adversely modify monk seal habitat; if so, then the project must be modified to reduce its impact.

Unless you're planning to undertake a federally funded or permitted project on the coast or in the ocean, critical habitat will not affect you. You and your 'ohana can still go to the beach, fish, gather, swim, surf, snorkel, dive, boat, and do all of the things you enjoy doing there now. And Hawaiian monk seals, with just 1,000 or so left in the wild, will get an extra layer of protection too.

Second, in Hawai'i it's already illegal to harm or kill corals, so protecting three types of corals under the Endangered Species Act will not change that. If the rule is finalized and the corals are protected, those pursuing federally funded or permitted projects will need to consult with the National Marine Fisheries Service about how to avoid harming corals. I'm told by Kitty Simonds of the Western Pacific Fisheries Council that Hawaii's federally permitted fisheries don't operate in waters with corals.

Corals in the Caribbean islands have been listed since 2006, and so far there have been no limitations on recreational or subsistence fishing. Although there have been a few instances where commercial fishing conducted under federal plans is being monitored or scaled back to protect corals, the vast majority of the projects that triggered reviews and mitigation measures involved construction and development projects, water pollution permits, and Navy exercises.

At the public hearing on the coral listings it was abundantly clear that fishermen and environmentalists alike agree that coral reefs are important—for diversity, fish habitat, shoreline protection, cultural heritage and our economy. Yet, scientists tell us that coral reefs are in trouble and that, without help, they could be completely destroyed in a few decades. The Endangered Species Act works, and it can provide a safety net for these imperiled corals. Protecting corals means elevating the visibility of the coral crisis; it means reducing the impacts of dredging, pollution, and coastal construction on coral reefs; and it could even mean action to reduce the threats of ocean warming and acidification.

Taking care of our oceans and coasts is a serious concern. Monk seals and corals are key indicators of the health of Hawaii's oceans. If we lose these species to extinction, we are all responsible. It also means that our fisheries and other ocean activities will suffer. It's time to act now and boldly protect the diversity of Hawaii.

About the author: *Miyoko Sakashita directs the oceans program at the Center for Biological Diversity, a nonprofit conservation organization. She has a background in environmental science and a law degree. The Endangered Species Act protections for corals and monk seal critical habitat respond to scientific petitions filed by the Center. Miyoko invites you to send her questions or comments about these issues (miyoko@biologicaldiversity.org).*