



Marine Mammals

Humpback whale or Koholā

Megaptera novaeangliae

SPECIES STATUS:
Federally Listed as Endangered,
Proposed for Delisting
State Listed as Endangered
State recognized as Indigenous
IUCN Red List – Least Concern

SPECIES INFORMATION: Koholā, or humpback whales, migrate to Hawai‘i in the winter to mate, give birth, and nurse their young. Gestation is 11 to 12 months. Females give birth every two to three years. Young are weaned in 8 to 12 months. Females reach maturity at about five to seven years of age. Males sing long-duration and potentially long-distance songs that likely aid in reproduction or other social communication. Little feeding is thought to occur in Hawaiian waters. Life span is about 45 years of age or more.

DISTRIBUTION: Kohalā in Hawaiian waters are members of the Central North Pacific stock. Members of this stock winter in Hawaiian waters in December through April, but few individuals can be seen from September through June. In summer they migrate to waters off Alaska, Russia, and British Columbia. The greatest concentrations in Hawaiian waters occur off the west side of Maui. The species also occurs in all major oceans from the equator to sub-polar latitudes.

ABUNDANCE: The winter population in Hawaiian waters is estimated at 10,000 whales, increasing at a rate of 5.5–6 percent annually.

LOCATION AND CONDITION OF KEY HABITAT: Kohalā prefer warm shallow waters for calving, commonly near offshore reefs, islands, or continental shores. Feeding grounds are in cold, productive, shallow waters.

THREATS:

- **Whaling.** Kohalā were historically threatened by commercial and aboriginal whaling, although a prohibition on commercial whaling by the International Whaling Commission has greatly reduced this threat.
- **Harassment, boat strikes, and entanglement.** Whale-watching boats have resulted in harassment and disturbance to kohalā. Ships colliding with kohalā and entanglement in fishing gear are significant causes of injury and mortality. Federal regulations prohibit approaches closer than 100 yards (91 meters) to kohalā, with stiffer fines for violations within the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary (Sanctuary),

which has reduced the threat of boat strikes. A Cetacean Take Reduction Plan implemented in the North Pacific in 1997 has reduced entanglements with fishing gear.

- Underwater noise. Sonar transmissions from military vessels, underwater detonations during military exercises, and vessel noise may interfere with behavior, and result in physical harm or loss of hearing sensitivity.

CONSERVATION ACTIONS: Actions specific to conservation of kohalā should include the following:

- Continue to reduce boat strikes and entanglement.
- Reduce marine debris and pollutants in the marine environment.
- Collaborate with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) on enforcement of the Marine Mammal Protection Act to prevent harassment and disturbance.
- Continue federal-State partnerships for kohalā conservation, most visibly in the form of management, education, and research within the Sanctuary.

MONITORING: Monitor abundance and distribution of kohalā.

RESEARCH PRIORITIES:

- Evaluate interactions with nearshore fisheries.
- Evaluate impacts of plastics and marine debris on marine mammals.
- Continue to evaluate the health of the population in the Sanctuary.

References:

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