

by Richard S. Shomura

■ Maka, a 2-year-old male Hawaiian monk seal, has received much attention lately because the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) plans to move Maka from the Waikiki Aquarium to Sea Life Park to continue NMFS monk seal research. The purpose of this research on captive seals is to help save the Hawaiian monk seal from extinction. Dr. Leighton Taylor, director of the Waikiki Aquarium, is opposed to removal of the two NMFS monk seals from the Aquarium. Some of the recent media coverage of the issue based on a press release issued by Dr. Taylor gives an incomplete picture of the problem and situation.

Recently a meeting involving officials from the aquarium, the University of Hawaii and NMFS was held at the Honolulu Laboratory in an attempt to resolve the problem. Dr. Taylor, who is currently traveling on the mainland, was represented at the meeting by acting aquarium director Bruce Carlson. Others from the aquarium included Reid Withrow, a seal specialist, and Wayne Gocke, a member of the Waikiki Aquarium Board and an active volunteer worker at the aquarium. NMFS was represented by Richard S. Shomura, director of the Honolulu Laboratory, and William G. Gilmartin, head of the Marine Mammals and Endangered Species Program of the laboratory. Dr. Phil Helfrich, director of the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology, chaired the meeting at the request of Dr. David Yount, University of Hawaii vice president for research. The aquarium is operated by the university, and Dr. Taylor reports to Dr. Yount.

Richard Shomura reported that "an agreement was reached in which Nuka (the older of the two seals at the aquarium) would remain at the aquarium for research, which would be within the guidelines established by the aquarium. This was a considerable concession by NMFS, since it reduced the research capabilities of the laboratory. Maka, the younger of the two seals, would go to Sea Life Park, with our (NMFS) assurance to the aquarium staff that we would have the details of a modified research plan reviewed by the NMFS Permit Office."

Shomura added, "The aquarium representatives were satisfied that the planned research was necessary and that this final approval of the new procedure would assure minimal risk to Maka."

Before a joint press release could be issued, Taylor called Helfrich to say that the agreement and the press release were unacceptable to him.

In reviewing the research to be conducted on Maka, Gilmartin emphasized that "the research involving Maka

is high priority if we are to find out what is causing the deaths of several dozens of Maka's cousins at French Frigate Shoals annually. Young seals at French Frigate Shoals are experiencing a significantly higher mortality than at any other breeding island in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands chain, and the cause may relate to availability of food. The experiment with Maka was to develop procedures to determine how efficiently monk seals feed in the wild. The double-labeled water technique, which Taylor objects to, is a standard procedure used by biologists on a number of wildlife including other species of seals."

Gilmartin further stated that "since the death of Tuffy, we have modified the test procedure and are confident that the study will present no more risk to the seal than force-feeding and collecting blood samples from Maka. Both procedures have been performed previously at the aquarium on Maka as well as on several other monk seals."

Shomura added that while he "believes this type of research is fully covered by our Federal Endangered Species Act Permit, our plans are to postpone the work until a fully detailed research outline has been reviewed by the NMFS Permit Office in Washington, D.C." Shomura expressed "surprise at Taylor's negative reaction to the research since Taylor was present when details of the research were given to the Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Team by Dr. Causey Whittow of the University of Hawaii in December 1984." Dr. Taylor is a member of the recovery team.

Shomura and Gilmartin believe NMFS has made a major concession in leaving Nuka at the aquarium and that, in taking Maka under the conditions mentioned earlier, they have satisfied most of the concerns for the safety of the animal voiced by the aquarium staff at the recent meeting.

Gilmartin said, "Maka will be moved at our earliest convenience for adaptation to the Sea Life Park facility and continuation of training for an audiogram study. While this research work is the only justification for keeping this endangered seal in captivity, public display will continue to be as much a part of Maka's life as possible, as it was at the aquarium." . . . Richard