

International Conference to Focus on Derelict Fishing Gear



Endangered Hawaiian monk seals at Pearl and Hermes Reef in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are attracted to fishing nets that have washed ashore. The Marine Debris Conference, Aug. 6–11 in Honolulu, will address growing concerns about the impacts of derelict fishing gear on endangered, threatened and protected species and the marine environment in the Pacific. —Chad Yoshinaga photo, NMFS Protected Species Investigation

While derelict fishing gear constitutes less than 20 percent of the marine debris in the ocean, there is growing concern about its impacts on endangered, threatened and protected species and the marine environment in the Pacific region. Since 1982, divers have found 170 endangered Hawaiian monk seals entangled in nets. Twenty-two were found entangled in 1999 alone. Also last year, more than 35 tons of derelict fishing gear were removed from the reefs and shoreline of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI). An estimated 2,000 to 3,000 tons of gear still remain.

To help solve this problem, the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary is sponsoring the International Marine Debris Conference on Derelict Fishing Gear and the Ocean Environment, August 6 to 11, at the Hawaii Convention Center in Honolulu. The conference is expected to draw about 300 scientists,

industry representatives, government agencies and members of the general public.

"Industry participation is essential in solving this Pacific-wide problem," notes Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, a co-sponsor of the event.

Scheduled speakers include US Senators Daniel Inouye and Daniel Akaka, US Congressman Neil Abercrombie, NOAA Undersecretary for Oceans and Atmosphere James Baker, explorer Jean-Michel Cousteau and James Coe, deputy director, Alaska Fisheries Center, National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS).

An estimated 68 percent of the lost or discarded fishing gear that reaches Hawaii is believed to come from trawl and gill net fisheries operating in the North Pacific. The gear is carried to Hawaii by prevalent ocean currents. Longline fisheries—especially those targeting swordfish—are also a source of debris such as lightsticks, lighters and monofilament line, which have

proved fatal to albatross chicks. The NWHI is home to the Pacific's major colonies of Laysan and black-footed albatross.

Through wave action, grounded derelict fishing gear can abrade coral reefs, scour the sea floor and damage other essential fish habitat. These actions may facilitate colonization by non-native species and potentially disrupt the natural ecological balance of an area.

The Hawaiian Islands are home to more than 5,000 marine plants and animals, a quarter of which are found nowhere else on Earth. Hawaii coral reefs represent almost 84 percent of all the known coral reefs under US jurisdiction. About 70 percent of US coral reefs are in the NWHI.

On the main Hawaiian Islands, about 80 percent of marine debris comes from land sources. Last year, volunteers picked up 114 tons of debris from the beaches and nearshore waters of these inhabited islands.

Conference co-sponsors are NMFS, Western Pacific and North Pacific Regional Fishery Management Councils, Hawaii Longline Association, US Coast Guard, US Department of State, US Fish and Wildlife Service, University of Hawaii Sea Grant College Program, Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources, Hawaii Coastal Zone Management Program, City and County of Honolulu, Center for Marine Conservation and Hawaii Audubon Society.

105th Council Meeting

July 9–11, 2000
Midway Atoll

The Council will discuss issues regarding the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and US Pacific Island possessions.