

Seal's fishhook scare is a success story and call for vigilance

By Deborah Manog
dmanog@staradvertiser.com

Benny, a 12-year-old Hawaiian monk seal, returned to the sea Friday morning after a two-week recovery from lifesaving surgery on New Year's Eve.

A team of 15 staff members from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration and at least 50 Monk Seal Foundation volunteers and onlookers watched Benny haul himself from a cage onto the shore at White Plains Beach before the waves pulled him out to the ocean.

"To see him finally touch the water, it was like he was home," said Charles Weaver, a volunteer with MSF.

On Dec. 29, volunteers reported seeing Benny at

Kaena Point, "agitated and shaking his head back and forth as if trying to free something from his mouth," but the monk seal left before officials arrived, a NOAA spokesman said.

The next day, volunteers scanned the ocean from Mokuleia to Kaena Point to Barbers Point for the distressed animal, which had fishing line coming from its mouth.

Benny was spotted near the shores of Ko Olina before being scared off and finally planting himself at White Plains Beach, where a NOAA rescue team trans-

ported him to its facility on Ford Island.

X-rays determined that surgery was necessary to dislodge a 4-inch fishhook embedded deep within the seal's stomach wall. A steel wire leader



connected to the hook went up from Benny's stomach through his esophagus and up to his mouth.

"The doctor had done such a great job that when we rolled the seal over on Monday for an exit physical (exam), we couldn't even find the suture line," NOAA Stranding Coordinator David Schofield said of Miles Yoshioka, who led the veterinary team that op-

erated on Benny. "It had healed that well."

Schofield says Benny's case is unusual because seal hookings usually occur in the mouth and can be removed on the beach without surgery.

According to NOAA researchers, 12 seal hookings — also the annual average — were reported in the state last year. One of those seals was found dead on Hawaii island after ingesting a barbed hook that pierced his throat and part of his lungs.

Hawaiian Monk Seal Recovery Coordinator Rachel Sprague urges anyone who accidentally hooks a seal to report it because it could mean life or death for the seal, which is an endangered species.

"Those fishermen (who

reported seal hooks in the past) were heroes," Sprague said. "They were the main reason why those seals are alive today."

There are fewer than 1,100 Hawaiian monk seals, and an estimated 150 live in the main Hawaiian Islands, according to the Marine Mammal Center. Benny's release is his second chance at life.

"We know him, we know his antics, we know where he goes and he's a character," Schofield said. "He's an interesting seal to watch."

NOAA officials ask that anyone who discovers a possibly injured seal call the national hotline at 888-256-9840. Officials also ask that people report seal sightings by phone, 220-7802, or by email at pifsc.monkseal-sighting@noaa.gov.

SEAL SAFETY TIPS

How to prevent seals from getting your fish and bait and from getting injured:

- >> Don't feed seals or discard old bait/scraps in the water if seals are in the area.
- >> If you encounter a seal while fishing, take a short break or change locations.
- >> Use a barbless circle hook.
- >> Keep track of lay gill nets.

Source: National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration

Inset: Benny looked around Friday before making his way to the water at White Plains Beach.

CRAIG T. KOJIMA /
CKOJIMA@STARADVERTISER.COM