

U.S. NEWS

Eye Problems Consign Boisterous Seal to Captivity

Need for Surgery Quells Second Thoughts on Plan to Transfer Pup to Marine Park

BY CHRIS HERRING

A monk seal named KP2, known for his boisterous play with swimmers off the Hawaiian island of Molokai, will require eye surgery that will force him into permanent captivity at a marine-life park.

A debate about whether KP2 should remain free, and whether his rough-housing posed a danger to swimmers, was the subject of a recent page 1 article in *The Wall Street Journal*.

Officials with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration discovered KP2's eyesight problems after the agency captured the seal to determine whether he could be relocated away from populated areas. Animal specialists found the 18-month-old seal had severe cataracts and was about 80% blind.

Carmen Colitz, a Florida-based animal eye surgeon who

flew to Hawaii for the tests, said KP2 likely lacked the nutrients he should have gotten from his mother after being born.

After giving birth to KP2, the seal's mother acted aggressively toward the newborn and refused to nurture him. As a result, NOAA officials helped raise the pup for the first eight months of its life.

Experts believe the cataract surgery would likely be performed in December or January. It would be the first such procedure on a monk seal. KP2 was believed to be among the only monk seals raised by humans.

"There have been a lot of firsts with this animal, and obviously this is another one," said David Schofield, a NOAA marine mammal response coordinator.

Though it is common for monk seals to have eye problems, KP2's case stands out because of the animal's youth. Scientists believe the opportunity

to fully restore the pup's vision outweighs the risk of surgery.

Animal surgeons normally bypass surgical procedures with older monk seals, saying it doesn't make sense to perform a risky procedure on an animal in his last few years.

Hawaiian monk seals, which typically live between 25 and 30 years, have been on the endangered-species list since 1976. There are 1,100 of them known to be living.

KP2 became well-known among Molokai's 7,000 inhabitants for swimming with children and climbing onto surfers' boards. Residents would find him sleeping on the back of their boats, or sometimes on the steps of Kaunakakai Wharf.

But as KP2 grew bigger, NOAA officials grew concerned the playful seal might hurt someone. A number of people reported that KP2 held them under the water for seconds at a time, which was less of a danger

when he was small. He grew to nearly 200 pounds.

NOAA's decision to move KP2 elicited arguments, but the eyesight problem effectively settled the debate.

Animal specialists are already working to secure KP2's post-surgery life in captivity. Sea Life Park, a marine-life attraction on Oahu that features penguin shows and allows visitors to swim with dolphins and sea lions is making arrangements for his arrival.

Park officials have raised nearly half of the \$120,000 needed to expand the facilities at Sea Life Park. KP2 will join four other seals there.

Jeff Pawloski, a Sea Life Park curator, said he expected KP2 to be a popular attraction.

"He's become a celebrity, and I imagine there will be a lot of attention placed on him because of that," he said. "We want to be prepared to handle it all."



Val Bloy

Monk seal KP2 played with swimmers and surfers. He sometimes slept on the steps of Kaunakakai Wharf on the island of Molokai in Hawaii.