

JOSH GREEN, M.D.  
GOVERNOR | KE KIA'ĀINA

SYLVIA LUKE  
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STATE OF HAWAII | KA MOKU'ĀINA 'O HAWAII'  
DEPARTMENT OF LAND AND NATURAL RESOURCES  
KA 'OIHANA KUMUWAIWAI 'ĀINA

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RYAN K.P. KANAKA'OLE  
FIRST DEPUTY

CIARA W.K. KAHAHANE  
DEPUTY DIRECTOR - WATER

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FORESTRY AND WILDLIFE  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION  
KAHOOLAWE ISLAND RESERVE COMMISSION  
LAND  
STATE PARKS

Testimony of  
RYAN K.P. KANAKA'OLE  
Acting Chairperson

Before the House Committee on  
WATER & LAND

Tuesday, March 24, 2026  
9:00 AM  
State Capitol, Conference Room 411

In consideration of  
SENATE BILL 2944, SENATE DRAFT 1  
RELATING TO CONSERVATION

Senate Bill 2944, Senate Draft 1 proposes to require the Board of Land and Natural Resources to adopt rules that implement wildlife viewing guidelines that substantially conform to the wildlife viewing guidelines issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and requires annual reports to the Legislature until rules are adopted. **The Department of Land and Natural Resources (Department) appreciates the intent of this measure and offers the following comments.**

The Department recognizes the importance of establishing safeguards to protect Hawaiian monk seals and green sea turtles, as well as the public, from harmful interactions. The Department currently works closely under a Joint Enforcement Agreement with NOAA to enforce federal laws that prohibit the harassment of monk seals and turtles and federal marine wildlife viewing guidelines that recommend remaining certain distances away.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act establishes federal authority over the conservation of marine mammals and allows for co-management agreements with states so long as their regulations are consistent with federal law. State laws prohibiting the "take" of Hawaiian monk seals include Hawaii Revised Statutes Chapter 195D and Hawaii Administrative Rules 13-124 which by definition prohibit harassing, harming, pursuing, hunting, shooting, wounding, killing, trapping, capturing, or collecting Hawaiian monk seals. This definition of "take" allows the Department to enforce prohibitions on acts that could be harmful to monk seals or result in a harmful interaction with people.

Currently, the Department's Division of Aquatic Resources provides guidance to the public through outreach and education programs in partnership with local organizations regarding the recommended viewing distance of 50 feet for monk seals generally and 150 feet for mothers with pups. While this guidance is helpful in preventing any potential "take" violations and any harmful interactions between people and Hawaiian monk seals, the Department understands that the viewing distance is not always feasible in every situation and that there may be situations where "take" could occur even from a distance. Therefore, enforcement is generally limited to illegal interactions where "take" occurs regardless of the viewing distance as these interactions are most harmful for both people and Hawaiian monk seals.

Mahalo for the opportunity to comment on this measure.

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/21/2026 10:01:44 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Katherine Buckovetz	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

As a Kailua Kona kupuna, Hawaiian monk seals are a special part of my upbringing in appreciating the culture and our lovely wildlife. I grew up seeing them on the beach and ocean and respected their mighty mana. We need to protect our wildlife from unwanted, unnatural interference from humans and their boats and lights. They interfere with the animals' ability to feed, sleep, tend to babies. So many are endangered. Protect our Aina and Kai for future generations as wildlife are part of our delicate ecosystem.

This bill is a win for the wildlife and humans. Humans will still be able to enjoy these animals while not invading their natural habitats. Please pass this bill to protect wildlife for future keiki. Make a difference now!

With Aloha, Katherine Buckovetz

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/21/2026 11:22:33 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Jill Asmar	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Following National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration guidelines is the bare minimum to what we should be doing to protect our land and oceans.

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/21/2026 11:40:22 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
GWEN YOUNG	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha officials,

Please pass SB2944 so that DLNR has clear rules that match NOAA recommendations to act upon. These viewing guidelines will allow our critically endangered and federally and State protected Hawaiian Monks Seals to do what they naturally need to without being harassed or impacted by unnecessary and inappropriate human interactions.

As volunteer for NOAA via HMAR and as a concerned resident and water person, I have seen too many monk seals, turtles, etc. Harassed by beach goers.

Mahalo foensupporting this bill.

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF SB2944\_SD1

Aloha Mark J. Hashem, Vice Chair Dee Morikawa, and Members of the Committee:

I am writing in **strong support of SB2944\_SD1** to give the state the authority it needs to stop harmful human interactions and protect Hawaiian monk seals, a critically endangered species central to Hawai'i's cultural and natural heritage.

### **Hawaiian Monk Seals and the Evidence for Stronger State Law**

The desire for photos has created a culture in which federal guidelines, maintaining at least 50 feet from seals (150 feet for mothers with pups), are frequently ignored. A study by NOAA Fisheries, "*Social media as a data resource for #monkseal conservation*," documents the need for stronger state protections.

### **Evidence of Disturbance**

The study's findings reveal how frequent close human interactions are and highlight the urgent need for state protections:

The study analyzed **2,400 Instagram posts** using the hashtag #monkseal. Findings include:

- **22% of posts showed people within ten feet of a seal.**
- **18% of posts showed clear disturbance to the animal.**

### **Biological Consequences**

Approaching Hawaiian monk seals can cause stress, disrupt sleeping, separate mothers and pups, and lead to habituation to humans. These impacts increase the **risk of injury or death to the seals**. The risk is further compounded by attacks from dogs.

I respectfully urge the committee to **pass SB2944\_SD1** and take immediate action to protect Hawaiian monk seals before more are put at risk.

Mahalo,  
Matthew Thompson

### **Source:**

*"Social media as a data resource for #monkseal conservation"*

<https://www.fisheries.noaa.gov/resource/peer-reviewed-research/social-media-data-resource-monkseal-conservation>

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/22/2026 8:20:43 PM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Melina Clark	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am testifying today with full support of bill SB2944. I have spent 20 years volunteering to help Hawaiian monk seals (and sea turtles when needed) only to witness thousands of violations when people ignore NOAA's rules and laws for safe wildlife viewing. There is a lack of enforcement and consequences which sends a mixed message and continued disregard for all rules and laws. I have made live-time calls and submitted DLNR tips asking for officers of law enforcement to be sent to the scene, only to be told over and over they have nobody or they are busy. As for the state officers who do show up at the scene, I have never once witnessed the safe wildlife viewing distance being enforced in full, even when witnesses come forward to share what went on, and point out the violators. People continue to ignore safe distances, signs, rope, volunteers, the public and officers so they can approach and disturb monk seals and turtles. There are countless social media posts showing all the issues. I have endless photos showing proof of issues regarding wildlife viewing. Enough is enough.

I have hundreds of photos to support my statements.

Thank you for your time in this matter.

Melina Clark

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/23/2026 1:04:50 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Ocean Ramsey	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

**TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF S.B. NO. 2944, S.D. 1  
RELATING TO CONSERVATION**

Submitted by: **Ocean Ramsey, PhD – Marine Scientist**

Dear Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

I strongly support S.B. No. 2944, S.D. 1, which requires the adoption of enforceable wildlife viewing guidelines aligned with those established by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA).

As a marine scientist who has spent over two decades working in Hawai‘i’s ocean and coastal environments, I have observed firsthand the critical importance of Hawai‘i’s beaches as essential habitat for native marine wildlife, including Hawaiian green sea turtles and Hawaiian monk seals. These species rely on nearshore and shoreline environments for resting, recovery, reproduction, and survival. Protecting these spaces from disturbance is not optional—it is necessary for the continued existence of these species.

Despite the availability of existing guidance, there is a persistent and growing issue with individuals approaching, crowding, and interacting with wildlife. In recent years, I have personally witnessed numerous instances where animals were surrounded by large groups of people, often driven by the desire to capture photos or videos for social media. In many cases, this behavior causes visible stress to the animals, disrupts critical resting or nursing periods, and increases the risk of harm to both wildlife and people.

The amplification of these interactions through social media has significantly intensified the problem. Wildlife is increasingly treated as a backdrop for content rather than as protected, living beings. This creates unsafe conditions, encourages copycat behavior, and places additional pressure on already vulnerable species.

While federal protections exist, enforcement is often limited by delayed reporting and lack of immediate response. This bill addresses a key gap by establishing clear, enforceable state-level rules that align with NOAA's science-based guidelines. Doing so will improve compliance, provide clarity for the public, and empower enforcement personnel to act in real time when violations occur.

Importantly, this measure also helps reduce conflict among members of the public. Those attempting to protect wildlife are often placed in difficult situations when others disregard guidelines. Clear rules with defined penalties create consistency, reduce ambiguity, and support a shared understanding of responsible behavior.

From both a scientific and practical perspective, the adoption of enforceable wildlife viewing guidelines is a necessary step toward protecting Hawai'i's marine species, preserving critical habitats, and ensuring public safety.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge the Committee to pass S.B. No. 2944, S.D. 1.

Mahalo for the opportunity to provide testimony.

Sincerely,

**Ocean Ramsey, PhD**

Marine Scientist, One Ocean Diving, Research, Conservation

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/23/2026 8:38:11 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

<b>Submitted By</b>	<b>Organization</b>	<b>Testifier Position</b>	<b>Testify</b>
Alannah B Farrell	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

This bill is hugely important. As visitors and residents read more online about where to go to see Hawaii's wildlife, the beaches are full of people who do not understand about endangered species. We need ENFORCEABLE rules and laws regarding the safe viewing of wildlife, especially Hawaiian monk seals and sea turtles. There have been far too many incidents of animal abuse due to people's ignorance and careless behavior toward our precious endangered species. We need this bill to help inform the public and stop the abuse of our precious wild marine mammals.

**SB-2944-SD-1**

Submitted on: 3/23/2026 9:52:47 AM

Testimony for WAL on 3/24/2026 9:00:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Tiffany Bruno	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha Chair, Vice Chair, and Members of the Committee,

My name is Tiffany Bruno, and I am writing in STRONG SUPPORT of SB2944, which would codify the marine wildlife viewing guidelines established by the [National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration](#) (NOAA) into Hawai‘i law.

As a volunteer with [Hawai‘i Marine Animal Response](#) (HMAR) and an avid diver, I regularly witness human interactions with protected marine wildlife — and the challenges that arise from a lack of clear, enforceable state standards.

Hawai‘i is home to the endangered [Hawaiian monk seal](#) and threatened green sea turtles (honu), both of which remain vulnerable and federally protected. NOAA has established science-based viewing guidelines, including recommended minimum distances, to reduce stress and harassment and to ensure natural, healthy behavior. However, without codification into state law, these guidelines are too often treated as optional rather than standard practice. I frequently hear, “It’s just a suggestion, not a law — what can we really do?”

I have personally seen green sea turtles completely surrounded — both on shore and in the water — by large groups standing or swimming within feet of them for photographs and videos. In some cases, honu are blocked from entering or exiting the ocean because people are so close. These interactions are not isolated incidents. They occur daily and create ongoing disturbance for animals attempting to rest, feed, or move safely between habitats.

Codifying NOAA’s guidelines into state law will:

- Provide clear, consistent protective standards for residents and visitors
- Strengthen enforceability and agency authority
- Improve public understanding of respectful wildlife viewing
- Reduce chronic stress and harassment of protected species

This bill does not limit access to the ocean. It ensures that Hawai‘i’s laws reflect science-based protections for animals that are already federally recognized as vulnerable.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge you to PASS SB2944.

Mahalo for your time and consideration.

Tiffany Bruno

Ewa Beach, HI