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

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

Before the Senate Committee on
WAYS AND MEANS

Wednesday, February 25, 2026
10:57 AM
State Capitol, Conference Room 211

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: 2/23/2026 3:45:54 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Lynn Bowen	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

This is very important. The Monkseals and turtles deserve this to be law. I work with the turtles on Poipu Beach on Kauai and we need more teeth in a law to better support the wildlife. We need a law to be able to send people to sometimes for them to understand they need to do the right thing.

Mahalo

lynn Bowen

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 4:12:17 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Kim Rogers	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I support giving enforcing rules related to wildlife viewing guidelines as recommended by NOAA.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 5:27:20 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
J. Takane	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

In order to insure the safety of our native species like our precious honu and monk seals, it's essential that we have strict guidelines with regards to viewing them. Viewing them from at least 10 feet if not more should be reinforced by written citations and fines to those who choose to violate them, often harassing and disturbing our native species in their native environment. We are the guardians of these lands and those that dwell in them. We must insure their continued existence by protecting them from harm.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 6:49:47 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Laura Zoller	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Please pass this bill. The issue is habituation- keep turtles, seals, native birds from being touched, fed, or threatened. Keep them wild. Give people education and fines.
mahalo
laura.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 7:04:35 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Pamela Johnson	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am writing this to support this bill because I have been a volunteer for Hawai'i Marine Animal Resuce and Malama I Na Honu doing outreach and monitoring 15 hours a week the last three years.

The marine life is safe when a volunteer is on site. But when a volunteer is not on site, people love to get close to these wild animals to harass them verbally or physically. I know this, because after I leave my shift at sunset, I've seen the people immediately ignore the Federal and State guidelines to stay back 10' from turtles, 50 ft from Hawaiian Monk seals and 150 feet from a Hawaiian Monk seal mom and her pup and walk right up to them.

Their behavior continues, simply because there is never a consequence to their harassment and verbal abuse., so they feel safe and comfortable to encroach on the space these marine animals deserve.

The seals are exhausted when they haul out to rest after hunting for 16 hours a day and need to rest so they can hunt the next day.

Please pass this bill, so people get a well deserved monetary fine which hopefully makes them think twice before harassing our marine animals in the future.

Mahalo

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 7:18:53 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
donna sawdon	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Maintaining a safe distance from Hawaiian monk seals, harbor seals, and sea turtles is critical for both the safety of the animals and humans. Close proximity or human interaction causes significant stress, disrupting vital behaviors like resting, breeding, and nursing. Approaching seal pups can cause mothers to abandon them.

Seals and turtles are wild animals capable of causing injury. Feeding or interacting with these animals makes them dependent on humans, which can lead to dangerous situations, such as entanglements in fishing gear or injury from boat propellers.

Humans can spread diseases to marine wildlife, and vice versa. For example, Toxoplasmosis, a disease from cat feces, is a leading cause of death for Hawaiian monk seals.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 7:54:50 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 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 [Hawaii Marine Animal Response](#) (HMAR) and an active 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

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 9:05:09 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Wendy Minor	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I have volunteered on beach response for the Hawaiian Monk Seals for over 10 years. I have encountered gross violations of the guidelines for safe viewing and have experienced first hand how the public has no respect for these guidelines or the volunteers. More teeth need to be put into these guidelines. They need to be regulations with enforcement. As it stands now, this species will not survive without stronger regulations that are enforced. The public has no idea how many of these seals have been killed. This information seems to be hushed up.

Please pass this bill. The Hawaiian Monk Seal is our state animal. They need our help.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 9:14:15 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Elizabeth Flanagan	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Information is not sufficient to keep some people from endangering our precious wildlife. They simply don't care about the impact of their actions, even by close proximity, as much as they should. Hence there is a need for better regulation.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 9:29:03 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Frances Tong	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

Aloha,

I'm writing in support of this bill, SB2944, and for BLNR to adopt rules that implement wildlife viewing guidelines that substantially conform to the wildlife viewing guidelines issued by NOAA.

I've been witness to, as have many other locals, the numerous incidents between our monk seals, honu and tourists. These are all certified takes.

Though I've done my best to ask visitors to keep their distance, there's only so much I can say because they know there's no consequence to their actions. They fly home, post their close encounters to social media and the cycle starts all over with the next visitor.

Having stronger rules in place will reduce the number of visitors spanking our seals, grabbing our honu and chasing our dolphins.

Mahalo,

Frances Tong

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/23/2026 11:14:00 PM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Johnnie-Mae L. Perry	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I, Johnnie-Mae L. Perry, Support

2944 SB RELATING TO CONSERVATION.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 2:22:07 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Shiu Mei Bassette	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

To whom it may concern:

I am asking you to vote in support of SB 2944. The Hawaiian Monk Seals are often harassed, murdered, poked &/or prodded by persons both on land & in the ocean. Sea turtles are also often harassed &/or abused.

The Hawaii State government must implement rules of law to provide law to stipulate the distance all persons must stay from Hawaii Monk Seals and Sea Turtles on these Hawaii islands.

I implore you to vote in support of SB2944.

TESTIMONY IN STRONG SUPPORT OF SB2944

Senate Committee on Ways and Means

Hearing Date: February 25, 2026

Time: 10:57 AM

Location: Conference Room 211

Aloha Chair Dela Cruz, Vice Chair Moriwaki, and Members of the Committee,

I am writing as a concerned citizen in strong support of SB2944. This bill represents a responsible step toward protecting Hawai'i's wildlife while also improving public safety and reducing enforcement challenges. Too often, people simply do not know how to interact appropriately with protected animals like endangered monk seals, which can lead to harmful encounters that require agency response and resources. Establishing clear, consistent wildlife viewing standards helps prevent problems before they occur, saving time and costs in the long run.

I also appreciate that SB2944 takes a reasonable approach by aligning state rules with existing federal guidance rather than creating entirely new programs. Using established science and outreach makes this an efficient solution that supports both conservation and responsible recreation. Hawai'i's unique wildlife is part of our shared heritage and also an important part of the visitor experience, so protecting these resources benefits our communities and economy as well.

For these reasons, I respectfully urge your support for SB2944.

Mahalo,
Matthew Thompson

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 5:20:43 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Elena Holcomb	Individual	Oppose	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I fully support SB 2944!

This is our chance to protect these animals so they can get rest without disturbance.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 7:03:56 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Mary Ryan Barthel	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I urge you to support this measure. This measure will offer better protection for our endangered and vulnerable marine wildlife. It is critical that these animals be able to rest without disturbance and that there are repercussions for the bad behavior that is constantly witnessed.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 8:19:28 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Nicole Schwab	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

My name is Nicole Schwab, and I am a new resident of Hawaii. I am writing in strong personal support of SB2944 and the continued protection of Hawaii's wildlife through the 150-foot distance law for monk seals and the 10-foot distance rule for sea turtles.

Living in Hawaii, encounters with monk seals and honu are not just rare wildlife sightings — they are deeply meaningful experiences. Seeing a monk seal resting peacefully on the beach or a turtle basking in the sun is a reminder that we share these islands with species found nowhere else on Earth. These moments are special because they happen on the animals' terms, when they feel safe enough to rest.

However, I have also witnessed situations where people unknowingly or intentionally approach too closely. Even when done out of curiosity or excitement, human presence can cause visible stress to these animals. Monk seals may lift their heads, reposition themselves, or return to the ocean before they have fully rested. Sea turtles may be forced to abandon critical resting time. What may seem like a small disturbance to a person can have real consequences for animals that rely on conserving energy to survive.

The Hawaiian monk seal is one of the most endangered marine mammals in the world. Every opportunity for them to rest without disturbance matters. These protections, supported by agencies like the Hawaii Department of Land and Natural Resources and NOAA Fisheries, exist because science shows that human disturbance can directly impact survival, especially for mothers and pups.

Beyond science, this is also about kuleana — our responsibility to care for the land and the animals that call Hawaii home. These species are part of what makes Hawaii unique. They are part of our identity, our culture, and our children's future. Without clear laws and enforcement, these vulnerable animals face increased stress and risk.

SB2944 reinforces the importance of giving wildlife the space they need to survive. It helps protect animals from unnecessary harm while also educating the public about respectful coexistence. These distance laws are simple, reasonable, and effective. They allow people to appreciate wildlife safely while ensuring the animals' well-being comes first.

For me personally, I want future generations — including my own family and community — to continue to experience the privilege of seeing monk seals and turtles thriving in their natural environment. Supporting SB2944 is a meaningful step toward ensuring that future.

Mahalo for your time, your leadership, and your commitment to protecting Hawaii's wildlife. I respectfully urge you to support SB2944.

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 8:45:20 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Aaron Fu	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

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

My name is Aaron Fu, and I am a Hawai‘i resident with a background in wildlife biology and conservation. I am writing in strong support of SB 2944.

This bill is critically important because it codifies NOAA’s existing wildlife viewing guidelines into Hawai‘i state law, creating enforceable protections for two of our most vulnerable and iconic species: the Hawaiian monk seal and native sea turtles. While the public is encouraged to give seals 50 feet of space (150 feet for mothers with pups) and turtles 10 feet, these guidelines currently lack consistent state-level enforcement. As a result, disturbance continues.

Wildlife disturbance is not harmless. When monk seals are repeatedly approached while resting on shore, they may be forced back into the ocean before they are fully rested, compromising their health and energy reserves. For mothers with pups, disturbance can interrupt nursing and bonding, directly affecting pup survival. Sea turtles basking on shore also require uninterrupted rest for thermoregulation and recovery. Chronic stress from human interaction can reduce fitness and long-term survival.

As someone pursuing a career dedicated to hands-on wildlife conservation in Hawai‘i, I have seen firsthand how increasing human-wildlife interactions put additional pressure on already threatened species. Education alone is not enough. Clear, enforceable standards are necessary to protect these animals.

SB 2944 provides reasonable, science-based buffer distances that already reflect federal guidance. It does not restrict responsible beach use — it simply establishes accountability for

behavior that harms protected wildlife. Hawai'i has a responsibility to safeguard species found nowhere else on Earth.

Monk seals and sea turtles cannot advocate for themselves in this building. We must do it for them.

I respectfully urge you to pass SB 2944.

Mahalo for your time and consideration.

Aaron Fu

Pearl City, Hawai'i

SB-2944-SD-1

Submitted on: 2/24/2026 10:54:04 AM

Testimony for WAM on 2/25/2026 10:57:00 AM

Submitted By	Organization	Testifier Position	Testify
Melina Clark	Individual	Support	Written Testimony Only

Comments:

I am testifying today with full support of bill SB2944. I have spent 20 years working to help Hawaiian monk seals and sea turtles, only to witness thousands of violations without any consequences applied under the Federal and State 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 officers who do show up at the scene, I have never once witnessed anyone being given a citation or arrested for the violations and this is after I (and others) provide photos, videos and my witness statements. The state of Hawaii must fix the system in place in order to take all violations seriously and not let a single person or group get away with harassment, disturbance or harm to our highly endangered and protected species, all for their entitled behaviors and mind set out on beaches. Because the rules and laws are clearly not being enforced, it sends a very mixed message to tourists and residents, therefore it is a free-for-all and I have thousands of photos to show the bad behaviors toward these animals. When it comes to anyone (agencies/public citizens) trying to help and get help out there, that mixed message creates issues all around.

I urge you to pass this bill to require the board of land and natural resources to adopt rules implementing wildlife viewing guidelines that substantially conform to the wildlife viewing guidelines issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration; and (2) Specify that violations of the rules will be subject to the penalties imposed under section 195D-9, Hawaii Revised Statutes. §195D- Viewing guidelines; wildlife; rules. (a) The board shall adopt rules, pursuant to chapter 91, to implement wildlife viewing guidelines that substantially conform to the wildlife viewing guidelines issued by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. (b) Any violations of rules adopted by the board pursuant to this section shall be subject to the penalties imposed by section 195D-9.

Thank you for your time in this matter.