

MARINE MAMMAL COMMISSION  
4340 EAST-WEST HIGHWAY, ROOM 905  
BETHESDA, MD 20814

7 March 2001

Admiral James M. Loy  
Commandant  
U.S. Coast Guard  
2100 2<sup>nd</sup> Street, S.W.  
Washington, D.C. 20593

Dear Admiral Loy:

Each year the Marine Mammal Commission prepares an annual report to Congress summarizing major issues and developments concerning the conservation of marine mammals. Although the National Marine Fisheries Service and the Fish and Wildlife Service have lead responsibility for protecting marine mammals, successful stewardship these species and their habitat is beyond the scope of any single agency. Rather, it relies on the cooperation and assistance of all agencies with marine management responsibilities. In preparing our annual report for calendar year 2000, the Coast Guard's assistance with a number of difficult recovery issues stood out as being especially noteworthy contributions. I write to express our particular appreciation to the Coast Guard for its help in addressing certain critical needs facing three endangered species: North Atlantic right whales, Hawaiian monk seals, and Florida manatees.

North Atlantic right whales, which number perhaps only 300 animals and have been declining, are one of the world's most endangered mammals - terrestrial or marine. Over the past year, the Coast Guard has continued to provide vital logistic support at a moment's notice to help the Center for Coastal Studies and their colleagues disentangle animals found caught in fishing gear. Without Coast Guard vessel and air support to transport disentanglement teams and equipment and help disentangle whales, it is possible, and perhaps likely, that several more right whales would have died over the past several years. For such a small population, the death of a single whale can make a substantial difference in recovery prospects. The assistance provided by Coast Guard personnel in several entanglement response efforts has thus been exceedingly important.

By the same token, the Coast Guard's continued assistance in

retrieving right whale carcasses found floating at sea, funding and providing logistic support for right whale surveys, and operating the mandatory ship reporting systems in right whale critical habitats have been tremendously valuable both for detecting and mitigating the effects of ship collisions with whales and entanglement in fishing gear. These well-placed contributions have substantially strengthened the effectiveness of the right whale recovery program and are a great credit to the Coast Guard.

Coast Guard assistance in conserving Hawaiian monk seals, the nation's most endangered seal, has been no less important to the recovery program for that species. The largest direct cause of human-related monk seal mortality is entanglement in derelict fishing gear. The number of seals found entangled has been increasing in recent years and reached a record high of 25 seals in 1999. More troubling is the unknown number of seals that become entangled and die offshore where monitoring is impossible. The problem stems from an enormous number of derelict nets that have drifted in from the North Pacific and accumulated in reefs surrounding the seals' only breeding habitat in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. These nets threaten many species in addition to monk seals and, to mitigate the problem, the Honolulu Laboratory of the National Marine Fisheries Service has begun organizing annual reef clean-up efforts involving many federal, state, and private groups. Removal of the nets is the only way to address this problem and the Coast Guard's contribution of ship support and personnel has been vital to this effort. Moreover, Coast Guard help in raising this issue with the International Maritime Organization offers hope for stimulating the international attention essential to resolve this and other marine debris problems.

Finally, the Coast Guard's increasing attention to the enforcement of boat speed regulatory zones established to protect endangered Florida manatees merits special recognition. Boat strikes have routinely been the source of about 25 percent of all manatee mortality. A tremendous amount of time and money have been spent over the past decade to establish and post speed zones to reduce this cause of manatee deaths. Boater compliance, however, has been poor. Increased enforcement, along with boater education, is now recognized as key to resolving this issue and, in our opinion, is one of the highest, if not the highest, priority for the manatee recovery program. Combined enforcement by the Coast Guard, the Fish and Wildlife Service, and the Florida Division of Law Enforcement is urgently needed and recent efforts by the Coast Guard's 7<sup>th</sup> District to expand manatee enforcement work has been an enormous help in beginning to address this need.

Although we recognize that protection of marine resources is a fundamental part of the Coast Guard's mission, and that the Coast Guard provides essential support for many other marine conservation efforts important to marine mammals and other marine species, the Marine Mammal Commission is grateful for your substantial contributions in the above areas. The success of recovery efforts for each of these species will depend in no small measure on Coast Guard assistance and support. The Coast Guard's contribution is appreciated by all who are involved in the recovery programs for these three species.

If there is any way we might be able to help as you continue to work on these issues, please do not hesitate to call on us.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Rob Mattlin". The signature is written in a cursive, slightly slanted style.

Robert H. Mattlin, Ph.D.  
Executive Director

cc Admiral Robert C. North, USCG  
Cdr. Michael Cern