

# Endangered Hawaiian monk seal shot in head on Molokai

By Caleb Jones  
The Associated Press

**H**ONOLULU — An endangered Hawaiian monk seal that was found dead on the island of Molokai in September was intentionally killed with a gun, according to federal officials.

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) officials said in a statement that the young female seal suffered a gunshot wound to its head.

This was the third intentional killing of a monk seal on the rural island in 2021 and the seventh in the past 10 years, according to NOAA. Two others were killed by “blunt force trauma” on Molokai in April.

“These intentional killings of this endangered species is devastating to the recovery of this population,” according to a NOAA statement.

There are only a few hundred monk seals left in the main Hawaiian Islands. About 1,100 more live in the remote, uninhabited Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. The endangered seals are found nowhere else.

The cause of death for several other seals on the island were inconclusive



because of decomposition or the carcasses washing out to sea before examinations could be conducted.

Killing the endangered species is a state and federal crime and the deaths are being investigated. Historically, monk seals have sometimes been perceived as a nuisance or competition to people who are fishing.

At a news conference, state officials said they have no indication of who might be responsible for the “egregious” killings.

“Make no mistake folks, these intentional killings are evil, despicable acts perpetrated against an endangered animal in its own natural habitat,” said Hawaii’s Division of Conservation and Resources Enforcement chief Jason Redulla. “Those

**INTENTIONAL DEATHS.** In this undated photo provided by Hawaii’s Marine Animal Response, an endangered Hawaiian monk seal known by officials as L11 is shown on a beach on the island of Molokai, Hawaii. National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration officials said in a statement that the young female seal suffered a gunshot wound to its head in September 2021. (Hawaii’s Marine Animal Response via AP — Permit #18786)

responsible must be held accountable.” The killings are felonies that carry a penalty of up to five years in prison, Redulla said.

Suzanne Case, the chair of Hawaii’s Department of Land and Natural Resources, noted local outrage at visitors who harassed monk seals earlier this year and called for a similar response to the killing of the seal that was shot in the head.

“It is past time for anyone who has information on the killing of this seal and the others to step forward,” Case said. “Earlier this year many people were outraged when a visitor slapped a seal on the back, and we trust the level of indignation we saw associated with that incident will be exceeded by the despicable shooting of (this seal) and the others taken by human hands.”

## Nebraska project finds key minerals, but can it mine them?

By Josh Funk  
The Associated Press

**E**LK CREEK, Neb. — Far beneath the rolling cropland of southeast Nebraska sits a deposit of elements that can be used to make steel and aluminum stronger. Extracting them would seem to be just the kind of project that President Joe Biden has argued is needed to reduce the United States’ dependence on foreign suppliers of critical minerals.

But a proposed mine to recover the minerals — niobium, scandium, and titanium — is instead providing a case study in the difficulty of actually launching such projects in the U.S.

The challenges start with the massive amount of money needed to build a mine, but also include fickle customers, the nation’s tougher environmental regulations, volatile markets, and intense international competition. As a result, despite years of efforts, the mine in Nebraska might never be built.

“People can spend their careers — all of their life — working for a mining company and never produce an ounce of metal,” said analyst David Abraham, who wrote a book about mining rare earth elements.

Without a doubt, money is the biggest hurdle to mining company NioCorp’s plans to build a mine about 80 miles south of Omaha. The company estimates it needs about \$1 billion and so far, it hasn’t secured enough major investors and the federal government hasn’t shown much willingness to share that cost.

The U.S. is dependent on imports for the 35 substances it currently designates as critical minerals, including niobium, scandium, and titanium. The U.S. relies entirely on imports for 14, and foreign producers provide more than half the supply of another 14 substances, led by China.

Recently, tight supplies caused prices to soar for the critical elements used in lightweight magnets for electric vehicles and other high-tech products. In 2011, new export restrictions by China caused abrupt shortages of 17 rare earth elements.

Niobium is mixed with steel to make the alloy stronger, lighter, and more heat and corrosion resistant. It is used in bridges, oil rigs, pipelines, and jet engines. Most of the U.S. supply comes from open pit mines in Brazil. The U.S. has never had a significant shortage, but the government is concerned enough that it keeps a supply in its national defense stockpile.

Scandium can make aluminum stronger, is used in some specialized lasers, and would be used more widely if greater supplies were available. Most comes from China, with smaller amounts produced in the Philippines, Russia, Canada, and Kazakhstan

The titanium that NioCorp hopes to produce would primarily be used in paint production. Unlike niobium and scandium, there are a few U.S. mines, but more than half the titanium is imported from China and other countries.

Company officials say tests have found some of the most sought-after elements at the Nebraska site, but it’s not clear yet whether there’s enough to be commercially viable.

Even if NioCorp can come up with the money for its mine, its profitability could hinge on whether its minerals will be cheaper than foreign competitors’ supplies.

“Simply knowing the existence of a mineral deposit that’s attractive geologically does not guarantee commercial viability,” said professor Rod Eggert, deputy director of the Critical Materials Institute at the Colorado School of Mines.

NioCorp has been actively exploring the site for seven

years, drilling out samples from as deep as 3,000 feet below the surface. The company raised \$6.2 million earlier this year to buy the land, and since 2015 has raised roughly \$60 million.

Nearly half of NioCorp’s 6,400 shareholders live in Nebraska not far from the project. The proposal has received the key state and federal environmental permits it would need.

But the Nebraska project is one of dozens of critical minerals projects worldwide at various stages of development, competing for investors.

“I can assure you that as the largest shareholder of this company, there is nothing more that I want done faster than financing, and we’re working our tails off to get it done,” said NioCorp CEO Mark Smith, who holds more than 19 million shares and has loaned the company more than \$2 million of his own money.

The Biden administration made rare earth elements a focus of its supply chain review earlier this year and is investigating the national security implications of relying so heavily on imports. A task force is planned to identify U.S. sites for production.

The new \$1 trillion infrastructure plan that provides incentives for electrical vehicles and wind power is expected to boost demand for critical minerals.

“It always helps when the public sees that the government has an interest in these areas,” NioCorp’s Smith said. “But I’ve been in this business for an awful long time — over 40 years — and I think it may be time for us to quit studying these issues and start doing something about the issues.”

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