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Students bless shearwaters

by Rachel Gehrlein - THE GARDEN ISLAND

PO'IPU — Last week, more than 20 fourth-grade students from Island School, along with their kumu Sabra Kauka, met at Makahu'ena Point to give blessing to this season's flock of Newell's shearwaters.

In this inaugural ceremony, the blessings are meant to give the endangered birds strength at a difficult yet important stage of their lives.

Considered the class of 2007 by Dr. Nick Holmes, coordinator of the Kaua'i Endangered Seabird Recovery Project, the seabirds were once believed to be extinct.

The Newell's shearwaters — or 'a'o — recovery was a struggle, aided by many years of conservation efforts by the DLNR Kaua'i Division of Forestry and Wildlife branch and the Save our Shearwaters program.

With the strong winds providing perfect release conditions, Kauka offered a pule, "May they safely make this transition from childhood to adulthood, from mountain to sea," to the shearwaters.

The seven seabirds were then placed in the release box by the students.

The shearwaters, one by one, popped out of the release box and flew out toward the sea as the students looked on.

"Newell's shearwaters are a part of the unique identity of Kaua'i and its people," Jackie Kozak of the Hawai'i Invasive Species Council, said, according to a press release. "However, these birds also face many serious threats to their survival."

Threats to the seabirds include feral cats, loose and unleashed dogs and stinging red ants. Invasive weeds also threaten the natural forest habitat of the shearwaters.

Artificial lighting attracts shearwaters, making them disoriented and causing them to fly into objects and fall to the ground, making them subject to predators.

If a fallen Newell's shearwater is discovered, do the following:

- Gently pick the seabird up as quickly and safely as possible. Wrap the bird with a towel or T-shirt and place the bird in a ventilated box for transport to the nearest aid station.
- Aid stations are at every fire station on the island, the Princeville Resort, the Kilauea Pharmacy, the Kalapaki Bay Marriott, Nawiliwili Harbor Security, the Po'ipu Grand Hyatt and the Po'ipu Sheraton.
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