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Erichsen to shed light on Shearwaters' glaring problem

By Andy Gross - The Garden Island

Light pollution on Kaua'i poses a huge threat to the fragile population of native birds, specifically the Newell's Shearwaters and to a lesser extent the Hawaiian Petrels.

It is Andrea Erichsen's job to shed light on this issue by identifying and then helping offenders to modify their systems to protect wildlife.

Erichsen, the Kauai Seabird Kaua'i Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP) Coordinator, has been on the job since June 1, under the auspices of the state Department of Land and Natural Resources Division of Forestry and Wildlife (DO-FAW).

She called the light pollution problem here "widespread."

Erichsen is charged with getting light polluters to mitigate harmful lighting, notably stadium lights, spot lights, flood lights and other unshielded lights that shine upward toward the sky or out over the ocean.

She said this type of lighting, which is common at many resorts, pose a flight risk to the Newell's Shearwaters who can become disoriented and are rendered helpless by blinding light.

Young Newell's Shearwaters are at greatest risk between September and December, according to wildlife officials.

The danger is greatest when there is no moonlight reflecting off of the ocean to guide them and artificial lighting beomes their primary source of light, which can result i the birds becoming disoriented.

According to Erichsen, Kaua'i has no lighting ordinance requiring modification of outdoor lights (other than street lights) to reduce light attraction impacts on wildlife.

"The lights have been affecting birds for 30 years, my job is to address this," she said.

A new law is on her side.

Act 224 (House Bill 895) relating to coastal light pollution became law July 12 without Gov. Linda Lingle's signature

The law restricts the use of coastal lighting except for security and safety purposes or for fixtures provided by a governmental agency.

"My job is to research the lighting situation and try and form partnerships to make the changes," she said.

Her twoyear tenure is funded through U.S. Forest and Wildlife Services through USFWS funds.

She said she hopes to assist in research coordination and data collection, provide outreach and information and work in a cooperative way with businesses and public agencies.

An important aspect of her job, particularly as it pertains to light pollution, which on Kauai is most pronounced on the north and east portions of the island, and to some extent in the Po'ipu area, is to determine levels, locations, and causes of "take" of the two seabird species.

The term "take" means to harass, harm, pursue, hunt, shoot, wound, kill, trap, capture, or collect, or to attempt to engage in any such conduct (Endangered Species Act (ESA) of 1973, section 3 item 18), according to federal law.

"I plan to monitor lighting changes and efforts made by businesses to evaluate compliance and success of efforts but also to find out more about what works and does not work," she said.

Each fall many Newell's Shearwaters come down in the Island's coastal areas while flying from their nests in the mountains to their feeding grounds at sea.



Andrea Erichsen

Light attraction causes the disorientation and "fallout" of Newell's Shearwater fledglings during their first nocturnal flights from nesting colonies to the sea.

Many birds are temporarily blinded or confused by bright outdoor lighting and are injured or killed when they become exhausted and fall to the ground and/or collide with powerlines and other structures on their descent to the ground. Once on the ground, they are completely vulnerable to death due to cars, dogs, cats, and starvation.

Erichsen said one of the key early components of her job has been identifying where business, institutions and individuals in possible violation of light pollution laws can purchase lighting products to rectify the lighting.

So far, the only establishment that sells products to modify lighting is Ace Hardware. Erichsen has contacted Home Depot about doing the same.

The fallout phenomenon was first noticed in the 1960s with increased tourism development on Kaua'i. Since 1978, the Division of Forestry and Wildlife (through the initiation of the Kauai Save our Shearwaters Program -SOS) has rescued a total 29,857 downed Newell's Shearwater fledglings during annual fallout seasons, of which about 91 percent were released alive and about nine percent died.

In 2004, 389 Newell's Shearwater were recovered (found and picked up).

Of these, 73 were found dead and 18 died of injuries sustained during their fall. In 2004, seven living and two dead Hawaiian Petrel were recovered by the SOS program, Erichsen said.

Because the Newell's Shearwater population on Kaua'i has declined by about 62 percent since Hurricane 'Iniki in 1992, these mortality factors severely compromise the species' recovery and potentially that of the Hawaiian Petrel.

Private landowners, corporations, state or local governments, or other non-Federal landowners who wish to conduct activities on their land that might incidentally harm, or "take," wildlife that is listed as endangered or threatened must first obtain an incidental take permit from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

To obtain a permit, the applicant must develop a Habitat Conservation Plan (HCP), designed to offset any harmful effects the proposed activity might have on the species. The HCP process allows development to proceed while promoting listed species conservation.

Kauai already has one HCP in development Kaua'i Island Utility Coop (KIUC) has replaced 3,049 lights on Kauai to prevent KIUC light facilities from causing light attraction problems for the seabirds. Their HCP process is underway but is not yet complete.

As part of their HCP mitigation KIUC has taken responsibility for funding and employing staff to run the SOS program in 2005 and beyond. This is a DO-FAW and USFWS coordinated effort that will be managed adaptively.

Heather Young is the new SOS Program Manager hired in 2005. Erichsen said she will be assisting KIUC with its SOS program.

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