

MPA NEWS



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Ahead of election, UK Government proposes giant MPA around Pitcairn; opposition party responds with ambitious MPA plans of its own

The UK Government has indicated its intent to designate an MPA around the Pitcairn Islands, a remote and lightly populated UK territory in the South Pacific, midway between New Zealand and Peru. It is anticipated that the MPA would encompass the islands' entire 834,334-km² marine area, and most of the MPA would be no-take.

A "Protect Pitcairn" coalition that has advocated for the MPA in recent years - led by Pitcairn's population of 50 residents, the Pew Charitable Trusts' Global Ocean Legacy program, and the National Geographic Society - has proposed that 99% of the MPA be off-limits to fishing ("A proposed no-take MPA where 100% of the citizens support it? Meet the Pitcairn Islands", MPA News 15:3). Under that proposal, commercial fishing by Pitcairners would continue to be allowed within 12 nm of the sole inhabited island (Pitcairn Island) and one nearby reef area. The UK Government has not yet announced a zoning plan for the proposed MPA.

At present, there is very little commercial fishing activity inside the Pitcairn Islands' EEZ, due in part to the archipelago's remoteness and its low biodiversity, at least compared to other Pacific islands. The Pitcairn Islands are not a significant habitat for migratory tuna, for example. As a result of the lack of commercial activity (there is also no port or natural harbor for Pitcairn), the waters are an intact, relatively pristine ecosystem.

Jo Royle of Pew's Global Ocean Legacy said, "With this designation, the UK raises the bar for protection of our ocean. The Pitcairn Islands Marine Reserve will build a refuge of untouched ocean."

Main opposition party promises more MPA plans

The government chose an indirect way to indicate its intent to designate the Pitcairn MPA, announcing it in a pre-election budget. The UK is holding a national election on 7 May 2015. The current government - a coalition of the Conservative Party and Liberal Democrats, with a Conservative prime minister - released the budget in March laying out its post-election governing plan.

Should the current government lose the 7 May election, a decision on Pitcairn would fall to the incoming government. The main opposition Labour Party has already announced that if it assumes power it will designate the Pitcairn MPA as well. In the party's "Green Plan" that it released in April, Labour goes even further, saying it will also work to designate new MPAs in the UK's South Atlantic territories of Ascension Island and South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands (<http://bit.ly/LabourGreenPlan>).

If the Conservative Party retains control of government, its pre-election budget still provides some caveats for designating the MPA. According to the budget, the designation "will be dependent upon reaching agreement with NGOs on satellite monitoring and with authorities in relevant ports to prevent landing of illegal catch, as well as on identifying a practical naval method of enforcing the MPA at a cost that can be accommodated within existing departmental expenditure limits."

The satellite-monitoring program is already operational. Pew and the UK-based innovation firm Catapult launched Project Eyes on the Seas in January 2015. The project helps authorities monitor illegal fishing activity in near real time, from a watchroom in the UK (<http://bit.ly/eyesonseas>). The Swiss-based Bertarelli Foundation has reportedly agreed to help fund Project Eyes on the Seas to support monitoring of the Pitcairn MPA for the next five years.

In terms of the cost of naval enforcement of the Pitcairn MPA, it would require £4 million (US \$6 million) annually, according to a source in the UK Government. Work is being undertaken to determine where that funding would come from in the naval budget.

Most of Pitcairn's inhabitants are descendants of the mutineers of the HMS Bounty, who settled the main island in 1790 with their Tahitian companions. Annual total income for the territory is less than £100,000 per year (US \$150,000), accounting for about 3% of the territory's annual expenditure (the UK Government contributes the rest). Supporters of the MPA assert it would boost marine tourism in the islands.

BOX: UN tribunal decides UK violated international law with Chagos MPA; could lead to reopening no-take area to fishing

Within days of the Pitcairn announcement by the UK Government, there was more big news with regard to a sizable MPA in a UK overseas territory. A UN tribunal ruled in March that the UK's designation in 2010 of a 640,000-km² MPA around the Chagos Islands in the Indian Ocean violated international law, and that the governments of the UK and Mauritius must now negotiate new terms for the MPA, which at present is almost entirely no-take.

The Chagos archipelago and its surrounding waters were detached from Mauritius prior to the latter's gaining independence from UK colonial rule in 1968. Mauritius argued to the tribunal that the UK should honor its original undertaking to return the islands and their waters to Mauritius. Mauritius also argued that designation of the Chagos MPA disregarded Mauritian interests in Chagos resources, and was designated largely to suit the UK's electoral timetable and to favor the US, which operates a military base on Diego Garcia, an island in the Chagos Archipelago.

The tribunal agreed with Mauritius on these points. The UK has promised to return Chagos to its former colony when the archipelago is no longer required as a strategic defense asset. At the earliest, that could occur in December 2016 when the current UK/US agreement on the military use of Diego Garcia expires.

With regard to the MPA, the tribunal ruling could lead to an eventual reopening of the no-take area to fishing, depending on forthcoming negotiations between the UK and Mauritian governments. The UK Foreign & Commonwealth Office (FCO) oversees the Chagos MPA. An FCO spokesperson told MPA News the UK will work to ensure conservation continues in Chagos waters. "The UK is committed to working with neighboring states, including Mauritius, to ensure proper conservation management of the Marine Protected Area," the spokesperson said. "Since the declaration of the MPA, the UK has made extensive efforts to engage with Mauritius on related issues, including fishing; Mauritius has refused these offers. We will now seek to work with Mauritius to explore how any fishing can be compatible with conservation."

The UN tribunal's March 2015 ruling, as well as other documents of the Chagos MPA arbitration, are available at www.pca-cpa.org/showpage.asp?pag_id=1429

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