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A proposed no-take MPA where 100% of the citizens support it? Meet the Pitcairn Islands

It is not often that an MPA proposal receives unanimous support from the nearby community, particularly when the proposal is for a large no-take area. But the unique circumstances surrounding the Pitcairn Islands - a remote UK territory in the South Pacific, midway between New Zealand and Peru - have contributed to why this site may be the next very large MPA to be designated in the world.

Like most remote island territories, the Pitcairns have a sizable EEZ (836,000 km²) and a small human population (50 people). Most of the Pitcairns' inhabitants are descendants of the mutineers of the HMS Bounty, who settled the main island in 1790 with their Tahitian companions.

There is very little commercial fishing occurring inside the Pitcairns' EEZ. This is due in part to the remoteness of the archipelago and in part to the relatively low biodiversity in Pitcairn offshore areas, compared to other Pacific archipelagos. The waters are not a frequent habitat for migratory tuna, for example.

The lack of commercial fishing means two things: (1) the Pitcairn marine ecosystems are in relatively pristine condition, and (2) there has been little if any opposition so far to calls for the UK government to designate 99% of the Pitcairns' EEZ (834,334 km²) a no-take MPA.

Those calls are coming from a "Protect Pitcairn" coalition consisting of the local population, the Pew Charitable Trusts' Global Ocean Legacy program, and the National Geographic Society. Supporters of the campaign were out in force at the IMPAC3 meeting in Marseille, France in October. The entirety of the Pitcairn Islands' population supports the proposal - it is unanimous.

The Pitcairns' economy is limited in general. Annual total income for the territory is less than 100,000 UK pounds per year (US \$164,000), accounting for about 3% of the territory's annual expenditure (the UK government contributes the rest). Supporters of the MPA proposal assert the new protected area would significantly boost tourism to the Pitcairn Islands - from sailing vessels and cruise ships interested in visiting such highly protected waters - and bolster the economy in the process.

Limited commercial fishing to be allowed in two places

Under the proposal championed by the Protect Pitcairn coalition, commercial fishing would continue to be allowed within 12 nm of the sole inhabited island (Pitcairn Island) and one nearby reef area. The fishing would primarily be done by Pitcairners for sale to visiting cruise ships. Deputy Mayor Simon Young of the Pitcairn Islands says there are "zero plans or any inclination" to allow fishing permits to other countries in the future.

Although the islands' coral reefs feature abundant sea life, the relatively non-biodiverse offshore areas would comprise most of the no-take MPA. Young says it still makes sense to protect both inshore and offshore areas, despite the lack of current pressure on the latter. "Even though there are less abundant fishing opportunities within our waters compared to many areas of ocean in the world, there would still be opportunities for rogue fishing vessels to exploit the waters for a profit," he says. And by drawing a no-take area around nearly all of the EEZ, he adds, it will be simpler to enforce a single, unified area as opposed to patches of ocean and boundaries with varying levels of protection.

For more information:

Simon Young, Pitcairn Islands. Email: deputymayor@pitcairn.gov.pn

Protect Pitcairn campaign website: www.pewenvironment.org/campaigns/protect-pitcairn-an-underwater-bounty/id/85899364751

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