

MPA NEWS



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US Designates "World's Largest" MPA in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

US President George W. Bush has designated a giant marine protected area around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI), a long stretch of coral islands, seamounts, banks, and shoals that extend westward from the main Hawaiian Islands. With an area of 139,793 square miles (362,000 km²), the NWHI Marine National Monument is being touted by US officials as the largest MPA in the world, surpassing Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park (344,400 km²). The monument holds what are considered to be the healthiest and least-disturbed tropical coral reefs under US jurisdiction, as well as thousands of marine species, including abundant populations of top-level predators.

The site will be co-managed by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), the US Fish and Wildlife Service, and the State of Hawai'i. All NWHI commercial fishing activity, which primarily consists of eight licensed bottomfishing operators, will be banned within five years inside the protected area. The Pew Charitable Trusts, an NGO, is negotiating with these bottomfishing operators on potential buyout payments for surrendering their permits immediately. Such payments would effectively end commercial fishing at the beginning rather than end of the five-year phaseout period. Recreational fishing - already minimal in the NWHI due to the remoteness of these mostly uninhabited islands - will also be prohibited, although the managing agencies will determine whether catch-and-release fishing methods will be allowable by permit around one atoll (Midway).

Traditional Native Hawaiian cultural practices, including fishing for pelagic species, will be allowed by permit as long as consumption occurs within the NWHI, and the monument will eventually receive an official Native Hawaiian name. Harvest by crews of research and management vessels and other permitted individuals will also be allowed. The proclamation of the monument is available online at <http://www.whitehouse.gov/news/releases/2006/06/print/20060615-18.html>.

"This protected area is important not only for the place it is protecting but also for the precedent it sets," says Elliott Norse, president of Marine Conservation Biology Institute, which worked with other NGOs to campaign for protection of the NWHI. "The US has been wrestling with the issue of creating either small, well-protected areas - with strict limits on activity - or large, not well-protected areas. This one is designed to be a very large, very well-protected area."

Building on previous protection

The NWHI have been the subject of presidential interest since former President Theodore Roosevelt designated some of the islands as a bird sanctuary in 1909. In 2000, former President Bill Clinton designated a coral reef ecosystem reserve over roughly 340,000 km² of the NWHI. It contained several no-take zones but allowed fishing elsewhere by small numbers of Hawai'i-based commercial pelagic fishermen and bottomfishing vessels, as well as sportfishermen (*MPA News* 2:6). The bottomfish fishers are the operators now negotiating for a buyout. (The pelagic fishery was only occasionally active and relatively unprofitable.)

A public process has been underway since 2002 to solicit public comments on potential site regulations, in anticipation that the coral reef ecosystem reserve would eventually be designated as a national marine sanctuary. During that process, the concept of stricter limits on activity in NWHI received substantial support from Hawaiian residents as well as national and international environmental groups, and in September 2005, Hawai'i Governor Linda Lingle banned nearly all extractive activity in state waters of the NWHI archipelago, out to 3 nm from the shore (*MPA News* 7:4). President Bush cited the public support for strict protection in his proclamation of the new NWHI Marine National Monument. His designation of the site as a "national monument" rather than a national park or national marine sanctuary allows the protected area to take effect immediately.

There has been one strong voice of dissent: the leadership of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, or Wespac, which oversees fishing in the region's federal waters and reports to NOAA. Kitty Simonds, executive director of Wespac, has questioned for several years the wisdom of prohibiting limited fishing by a small fleet, arguing that the council was doing an effective job of balancing conservation with sustainable fishing in the NWHI. In June 2000 upon President Clinton's designation of the ecosystem reserve, Simonds asked *MPA News*, "Why shut the fisheries down if there are no threats?" Wespac instead recommended stricter fishing regulations, including limits on bottomfish and pelagic takes, closure of other fisheries, and no-take marine reserves in 40% of the NWHI. After President Bush designated the national monument, Wespac responded, "We believe the abundance and biodiversity of the area attests to the successful management of the NWHI fisheries by the Council these past 30 years, and indicates that properly regulated fisheries can operate in the NWHI without impacting the ecosystem." Simonds says Wespac will ask Congress to allow the bottomfish fishery to operate indefinitely in the monument.

The strict protection for NWHI represents a major victory for local and national environmental organizations, which employed a range of techniques to build political support. A core group of NGOs - the 'Ilio'ulaokalani Coalition (a Native Hawaiian cultural organization), KAHEA (an alliance of Native Hawaiians and environmental activists), and Hawai'i offices of two national organizations (Environmental Defense and Sierra Club) - worked for six years to ensure transparency of NWHI public planning processes, strengthen public participation, and brief decision-makers. The Pew Charitable Trusts, a national organization (formerly a foundation), launched a multifaceted campaign in 2005 to sway local and national support in favor of limits on NWHI commercial fishing, including leading the effort currently underway to craft a buyout package to retire the existing commercial fishing permits. Other organizations - The Ocean Conservancy, the Hawaii Audubon Society, and Marine Conservation Biology Institute (MCBI) - played multiple roles in research and advocacy, including enlisting the assistance of influential celebrities and politicians. In April, a dinner for President Bush was arranged at which he viewed a new film by Jean-Michel Cousteau on the need to protect the NWHI (*Voyage to Kure*) and he discussed the film afterward with Cousteau and scientist Sylvia Earle, another proponent of protection.

Cha Smith, executive director of KAHEA, calls the national monument a milestone in marine and cultural rights protection. She adds, however, that the public should remain vigilant during the forthcoming process to refine and inform the details of the monument's management plan. "There need to be very specific criteria established for the approval of research projects," she says. "Projects must be tied directly to the needs of the resource and driven by the management goals. Right now there is a research 'gold rush'...and that must stop. The permitting process must also be transparent, with adequate opportunity for public comment and a panel of scientists representing terrestrial wildlife, ecosystem science, coral reefs, sea birds, and marine mammals." In addition, Smith wants to make sure that management agencies receive the funding necessary for effective management. Congress, which was not consulted on designation of the national monument, will have oversight of its funding.

Norse of MCBI says adequate funding will be especially critical for enforcement. Poaching of sharks in other remote protected areas of the Pacific, such as Bikini Atoll in the Marshall Islands, has occurred in recent years. "I would like to see adequate funds established to provide Coast Guard spot checks of the protected area and passovers by satellites," he says. "I would love for there to be some creative thinking about real-time ways we could monitor movement of vessels throughout. Vessel monitoring systems [which are now required for vessels entering the national monument] are not enough, as they only monitor the vessels that obey the law to carry them." Without adequate enforcement, says Norse, the relatively pristine archipelago "will be like a supermarket with the doors open 24 hours a day and no personnel and no cameras."

Rick Gaffney, president of the Hawai'i Fishing and Boating Association, is also concerned about funding. His organization supported strict protection for the archipelago despite the fact it would limit activities of its members - recreational fishermen. "There appears to be no money attached to the proclamation," says Gaffney. "Enforcement will be very expensive, and the Coast Guard has already been scaling back its activity in the region for funding reasons."

There is concern among some environmental advocates over a provision in the proclamation to allow "sustenance fishing" there by permit. The term - not to be confused with "subsistence fishing", which is often allowed for local and indigenous groups in MPAs worldwide - is defined as allowing for the capture and consumption of fish within the monument as long as it is incidental to an otherwise-permitted activity, such as research. "It's not clear who this is meant to sustain," says Norse. "The definition of research can be so broad that presumably a ship full of tourists could be dubbed 'researchers' and they could go sustenance-fishing."

As acting superintendent of the NWHI Marine National Monument, Aulani Wilhelm will oversee the application of such terms, and says data will be kept to ensure that any sustenance fishing - or other activity - does not harm the ecosystem. "The biggest challenge we face in managing and enforcing the marine national monument is making sure that our efforts will be sufficient to implement the proclamation provisions and ensure a protection regime worthy of this special place," says Wilhelm. "NOAA, along with the US Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of Hawai'i, is charged to develop a strong and coordinated management regime to cooperatively manage the area in a way that is unparalleled elsewhere in the US. Given the strong conservation provisions, relatively remote location, and enormous size of the monument, obtaining the resources and funding necessary to study, manage, monitor, and enforce the area will continue to be a challenge every year."

For more information

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BOX: Next month

The new Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument is the world's largest MPA. Or is it? It depends on how you define "marine protected area". Next month *MPA News* will introduce several contenders for the mantle of "world's largest MPA" and ask readers for their pick.

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