



June 15, 2006

Nation

Vast Hawaii Sea Area Becomes National Monument

by Elizabeth Shogren

Audio for this story will be available at approx. 7:30 p.m. ET



Photo: Luci Pemoni

A green sea turtle on Eastern Island in the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. The refuge is located in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. AP

All Things Considered, June 15, 2006 · A vast chain of remote Hawaiian islands, teeming with endangered sea life, has become the nation's newest national monument -- and the largest patch of protected ocean on earth.

President Bush bestowed monument status on the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, which span 1,200 nautical miles, on Thursday.

"To put this area in context, this national monument is more than 100 times larger than Yosemite National Park," President Bush said. "It's larger than 46 of our 50 states, and more than seven times larger than all our national marine sanctuaries combined. This is a big deal."

Scientists say the area provides a rare example of the way oceans are supposed to be.

Marine biologist Christopher Lowe, a professor at the California State University at Long Beach, knows this stretch of the Pacific well from countless hours on boats and diving under the surface. He says above the water, the island chain is somewhat bland. Most of the islands are barren sand or rock. But underwater, the coral reefs are spectacular.

"It's not uncommon to see a dozen gray reef sharks or Galapagos sharks -- and these sharks range from four-to-nine-feet-long -- just swimming along, watching you, or to be surrounded by a school of 40-to-50-pound jacks," Lowe says.

Jacks are silvery, carnivorous fish. Large jacks have been wiped out in many other parts of the world. Lowe says you see underwater scenes that don't exist elsewhere because most reef ecosystems have been destroyed by too much fishing.

"It's so remarkable to see large predators doing their thing in the wild, to see a tiger shark eat a fledgling albatross," he says. "It's awe-inspiring to see a 13-foot-shark launch out of the water to grab an albatross that's making it's first



Photo: James Watt

The Hawaiian monk seal, which lives in the marine preserve, is one of the most critically endangered marine mammals in the United States. NOAA



Photo: James Watt

A school of Hawaiian squirrelfish at French Frigate Shoals in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. NOAA

- [Explore a Slideshow of the Reserve](#)

* Following this link will take you to the NOAA Web site. Note: The file may take a while to load.



A juvenile Red-footed Booby, one of the many bird species that can be spotted on the reserve. NOAA



Photo: James Watt

flight."

Many presidents have long tried to protect this wild stretch of the Pacific. A century ago, Theodore Roosevelt named most of the islands a wildlife refuge. Six years ago, Bill Clinton designated the waters around the islands as a coral reef reserve.

President Bush wants to do more. Within five years, all commercial and recreational fishing will be prohibited. That's good news for the endangered monk seals. Scientists say these creatures were devastated because fishermen caught almost all of the spiny lobsters in the region.

Elliot Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, calls today's declaration "the most important thing that President Bush has done for the environment since he took office."

"I think it's one for the history books," Norse says.

Usually, Norse is on the opposite end of environmental debates from President Bush. But like many environmentalist, he's thrilled with the announcement. And the decision isn't just important for the creatures. Protecting the area is especially meaningful for native Hawaiians like Aulani Wilhelm.

"The land, the sea, the creatures -- all the elements, really, are our ancestors," she says. "So for us, taking care of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is obvious; it's like taking care of our elderly grandparents or people who have passed away. This connection is real for us."

Wilhelm runs the reserve for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration. She says it's not going to be easy for most Americans to visit this new national monument.

First you'll need to get a permit. Then, you have to fly Hawaii. From there, it takes three days by boat to get to the nearest part of the new monument. And the seas in this part of the Pacific have a reputation for being very rough. The only island where tourists will be allowed is Midway. It used to be a naval airbase, so it has roads, buildings and an air strip.

Coral reef expert Donald Potts is there now. He says visitors will have to get used to the fact that creatures rule this place.

"We ride bicycles -- one-speed bicycles -- because we have to navigate between the albatross, which are nesting on all the roads and tracks everywhere," Potts says. "They don't move for us. We go around them."

Many scientists say the fewer people who visit the new monument, the better. The reason the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are still so special is that few people have disturbed them. The scientists hope it stays that way.

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Sharks and other large fish are common on most reefs throughout the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. NOAA



Photo: James Watt

Colorful pennantfish, pyramid and milletseed butterflyfish school in great numbers at Rapture Reef, in the French Frigate Shoals area of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. NOAA



Photo: Lucy Pemoni

A Laysan albatross patiently incubates its eggs on Eastern Island in the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge. AP



Photo: James Watt

Red pencil urchin, one of the many marvels beneath the waters of the remote island chain. NOAA

Reflections on the Sanctuary

- [Aulani Wilhelm](#), acting coordinator of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, talks about the ancestral connection that native Hawaiians like her feel to the sanctuary.
 - [Jim Maragos](#), a coral reef biologist for the federal Fish and Wildlife Service, discusses the adverse effects of commercial fishing on the marine reserve area.
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