

## Bush creates world's biggest ocean preserve

Northwestern Hawaiian Islands 'as important as Yellowstone,' activist says  
MSNBC staff and news service reports

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WASHINGTON - President Bush on Thursday created the world's largest marine protected area — a group of remote Hawaiian islands that cover 84 million acres and are home to 7,000 species of birds, fish and marine mammals, at least a quarter of which are unique to Hawaii.

At a White House ceremony, the president designated the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands the United States' 75th national monument. The islands have been described as "America's Galapagos" and as the most intact tropical marine region under U.S. jurisdiction.

"To put this area in context, this national monument is more than 100 times larger than Yosemite National Park," 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."

The decision immediately sets aside 139,000 square miles of largely uninhabited islands, atolls, coral reef colonies and underwater peaks known as seamounts to be managed by federal and state agencies.

Conrad Lautenbacher, head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, which will manage nearly all of it, said the new protected area would dwarf all others.

"It's the single-largest act of ocean conservation in history. It's a large milestone," Lautenbacher said. "It is a place to maintain biodiversity and to maintain basically the nurseries of the Pacific. It spawns a lot of the life that permeates the middle of the Pacific Ocean."

### 'Unprecedented win'

Conservationists, who have clashed with the Bush administration on most other environmental issues, were just as pleased.

"This an unprecedented win for endangered Hawaiian monk seals, green sea turtles, black-footed albatrosses, tiger sharks, the incredible reef corals in these waters, the people of Hawaii and all Americans, now and in generations to come," Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, said in a statement ahead of the announcement. "It's the start of a new era of protecting places in the sea before they're degraded beyond recognition. In my opinion, this is the best thing President Bush has done for the environment."

Added Fred Krupp, head of Environmental Defense: "The president is creating the world's largest marine protected area. It's as important as the establishment of Yellowstone" — arguably the crown jewel of the National Park System.

The national monument, about the size of California, is larger even than Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

Roger Rufe, president of The Ocean Conservancy, agreed the area was on par with Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon. "Teddy Roosevelt is largely considered the father of our national park system," he added. With this national monument, "President Bush may be securing a similar legacy in our oceans."

## **Clinton designation**

Past presidents have taken steps to protect the region, including in 2000 when then President Clinton declared it an ecosystem reserve.

National monument status would provide much stronger, and nearly permanent, protection. Unlike the area's current ecosystem reserve status, monument status comes with permanent funding and cannot be easily changed or revoked by a new president.

The president had planned as late as Wednesday to use instead the National Marine Sanctuary Act, a law that would allow challenges from Congress and others to the decision, said a senior administration official, speaking earlier on condition of anonymity so as not to upstage Bush.

"This means the area will get immediate protection rather than having to wait another year," the official said, adding that Bush opted at the last minute to create a national monument after realizing the process had gone on for five years and elicited thousands of comments.

Starting 160 miles west of Kauai, the remote 1,400-mile long string of islands are blanketed with 14 million seabirds that nest there. Beneath the surface of the surrounding waters, fish crowd into pristine coral reefs, some 80-feet tall.

"This refuge that spans 1,400 miles is America's Galapagos, and Americans don't know it," Jim Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, said last year during a trip to the islands.

Midway Atoll, one of the outermost points of the new monument, will retain an emergency landing strip for commercial and military trans-Pacific flights.

## **Fishing, visitor concerns**

One issue yet to be settled is whether fishing and coral harvesting would be allowed within the area.

Such a ban would create the largest no-take marine reserve in the nation, second in the world only to the Great Barrier Reef.

According to Hawaii officials, nine bottomfishers now work the area, using weighted, baited fishing lines to catch about \$1.5 million worth of snappers and sea bass.

Gov. Linda Lingle, who earlier signed rules banning all fishing from state waters extending three miles off the shores, has been pushing for a similar ban for federal waters extending out about 60 miles.

Administration officials say their intent is to preserve zoned access for native Hawaiian activities, educational and scientific expeditions. Recreational and tourist visits that are no more harmful than scuba diving or photography also will be allowed. Permits, however, will be required for all activities.

But some local groups want to further limit access to the area, fearing a "gold rush" of researchers.

"The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are fast becoming a magnet for large research vessels and questionable research," said Cha Smith, head of the Hawaiian-Environmental Alliance. "It will be of great importance to ensure that research is limited to activities necessary for management and restoration efforts and that educational activities bring the place to people and not take people to the place."

## **Second monument by Bush**

It is only the second time that Bush has invoked the 1906 National Antiquities Act, which gives the president authority to create national monuments to preserve the nation's ancient cultural sites and

unusual geological features. The law itself turned 100 this month.

In February, Bush used the antiquities law for the first time when he declared part of the African Burial Ground in the lower Manhattan section of New York City a national monument. The site, covering less than half an acre, marks where an estimated 20,000 slaves and free blacks were buried in the 18th century.

Clinton used the act to create 19 national monuments and expand three others to set aside 5.9 million acres of land, mainly in the West, drawing widespread criticism from conservatives.

*MSNBC.com's Miguel Llanos and The Associated Press contributed to this report.*

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