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Hawaiian Marine Reserve To Be World's Largest

Bush to Designate National Park in Pacific Waters

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President Bush plans to designate an island chain spanning nearly 1,400 miles of the Pacific northwest of Hawaii as a national monument today, creating the largest protected marine reserve in the world, according to sources familiar with the plan.

Establishing the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a strictly protected marine reserve, which Bush is slated to announce this afternoon, could prove to be the administration's most enduring environmental legacy. The roughly 100-mile-wide area encompasses a string of uninhabited islands that support more than 7,000 marine species, at least a fourth of which are found nowhere else on Earth.

The islands include almost 70 percent of the nation's tropical, shallow-water coral reefs, a rookery for 14 million seabirds, and the last refuge for the endangered Hawaiian monk seal and the threatened green sea turtle. The area also has an abundance of large predatory fish at a time when 90 percent of such species have disappeared from the world's oceans.

Encompassing nearly 140,000 square miles, an area nearly the size of Montana and larger than all the national parks combined, the reserve will just surpass Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park as the largest protected marine area in the world. It will also, however, be one of the least accessible.

"This is a landmark conservation event," said Joshua Reichert, who heads the Pew Charitable Trusts' environment programs and had pushed to have the area designated as a marine sanctuary. "The government is saying in certain places, for certain reasons, it is important to restrict activities that have the potential to damage the marine environment, of which fishing is a big one."

"The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands represent an incredible opportunity to preserve nature much as it was, or has been, for millions of years, because the hand of man has not wreaked the same kind of havoc as we have elsewhere in the world," said Rep. Ed Case (D-Hawaii), who has lobbied for the designation since he was elected in 2002.

The plan had been resisted by local Hawaiian fishing interests that feared losing access to traditional fishing grounds.

The nation has 13 marine sanctuaries scattered from the Florida Keys to the Channel Islands off the

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California coast. They provide varying levels of protection and have had mixed success in preserving sensitive ecosystems. In areas where fishing was banned outright, scientists have charted a resurgence of larger fish and coral reefs, but in areas that allow commercial and recreational fishing, damaged ecosystems have struggled to rebound.

Administration officials declined to comment on the record, but one senior official, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to avoid upstaging the president's announcement, said the plan will end fishing in the area within five years. It will allow Hawaiians to have access to the area for other traditional activities and will include the Midway World War II memorial, a facility that is open for research, education and ecotourism. Visitors wishing to snorkel, dive or take photographs in the area will have to obtain a permit, and no one may take fish, wildlife, corals or minerals from the region.

President Theodore Roosevelt established a bird sanctuary on some of the islands in 1909. President Bill Clinton created a coral-reef ecosystem reserve in the area by executive orders in late 2000 and early 2001, but he stopped short of designating a permanent sanctuary. Former House speaker Newt Gingrich (R-Ga.) sent the White House a letter in February hailing the sanctuary plan as "a marvelous opportunity to leave a historic mark on U.S. and world conservation history." Hawaii Gov. Linda Lingle (R) also endorsed the idea.

The proposal has had a cooler reception from Democratic Sens. Daniel K. Inouye and Daniel K. Akaka, who have traditionally been protective of local fishermen, but the administration is relying on a coalition of environmental groups -- headed by the Pew Charitable Trusts -- to raise the money for buying out the fishermen.

By declaring the islands a national monument, Bush will circumvent a year-long congressional approval process required in the designation of an area as a marine sanctuary, and will provide the area the highest regulatory protection possible under the law. Clinton designated several terrestrial and marine national monuments toward the end of his tenure, though he did not name a marine monument of this scope.

"Declaring the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands a national monument will mean immediate protection, immediate implementation of the management measures included in the plan that was developed in the marine sanctuary process," the senior official said last night.

Ellen Athas of the Ocean Conservancy said the monument designation is "permanent and does not undergo periodic review like a marine sanctuary." She added: "National monuments can provide lasting protection for the environment."

Eight Hawaiians hold permits to fish commercially in the area, targeting red snapper, black grouper and other species. The fishery made a profit of only \$300,000 in 2003, and one of the permitted fishermen, Zenen Ozoa, has lobbied to close it on the grounds that it is too environmentally destructive.

The island archipelago is remote -- it takes fishermen two days to reach the area from the main islands -- but debris from vessels that troll the Pacific have ensnared marine animals and damaged the delicate ecosystem. Filmmaker Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of legendary marine explorer Jacques Cousteau, spent six weeks there in 2003 and found debris from 52 countries, including cigarette lighters and toy soldiers.

"That was really shocking," said Cousteau, who produced two one-hour documentaries that aired on public television in April. "There's a lot of really nasty stuff happening over there."

Although the islands are remote, they remain vulnerable: Fishing vessels took about 12 million lobsters from the area between 1977 and 1997, and though a federal judge ordered the lobster fishery closed in 2000, the area has yet to recover.

In contrast to the controversies over administration stands on a number of other environmental issues, advocacy groups, activists and Democrats hailed Bush's work on this matter. Case, the Hawaii congressman, said the president "deserves credit" for undertaking "the most revolutionary act by any president, any administration, in terms of marine resources."

James L. Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, toured the islands in December with Cousteau and Lingle.

First lady Laura Bush has also taken a personal interest in the island chain, said the senior administration official. She and the president hosted a White House screening of Cousteau's film on April 5.

Case, whose district includes the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, said that, ironically, the designation means fewer Americans will see the region.

"We are all going to have to take it on faith that it's that special, because . . . most of us will never see it, and we never should see it," Case said. "We're just going to have to let it go."

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