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Remarks by the President on the Establishment of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT ON THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE NORTHWESTERN HAWAIIAN ISLANDS NATIONAL MONUMENT

The East Room

2:34 P.M. EDT

THE PRESIDENT: Thank you all. Please be seated. Pretty good deal when you get introduced by your wife. (Laughter.) I really am glad Laura is here, because she is a champion of our nation's cultural and natural resources. It's an honor to share this important day with her at the podium. And I want to thank you all for coming.

As I was walking in here, I actually saw Theodore Roosevelt's portrait over there. What's interesting is that we are here to fulfill a legacy of conservation that was first begun by Theodore Roosevelt. In 1909, President Roosevelt established the Hawaiian Island Reservation, and he did so to protect native seabirds from being hunted. His executive order was the first of many presidential efforts to protect the life and waters of Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

In a few moments, I will sign a proclamation to designate the waters in this region a national monument. This action will create the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument, the largest single conservation area in the history of our country, and the largest protected marine area in the world. (Applause.)

As a marine national monument, the waters of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands will receive our nation's highest form of marine environmental protection. We will protect a precious natural resource. We will show our respect for the cultural and historical importance of this area. And we will create an important place for research and learning about how we can be good stewards of our oceans and our environment.

I can't thank the Governor for being here enough, Governor Linda Lingle. She's -- as I'll mention a little later on, we've been in close consultation with the Governor. And when did you leave yesterday? (Laughter.) We're sure honored you're here representing your great state.

I want to thank Senator Daniel Akaka for joining us, as well. I want to thank Congressman Ed Case, and I know that Congressman Neil Abercrombie will be here shortly for the signing of this important proclamation. Sherry Boehlert is here from the great state of New York. A strong conservationist. Welcome, Congressman. I'm glad you're here. I appreciate Senator Fred Hemmings from -- he's a Minority Leader, by the way, of the Hawaiian State Senate. Thanks for coming. I'm glad you're here.

I appreciate Secretary Dirk Kempthorne, Secretary Carlos Gutierrez. I want to thank Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher of NOAA. Thanks for coming. Appreciate your hard work on this issue. As you will hear a little later on, NOAA will be playing an important part of this national monument.

I want to thank Jean-Michel Cousteau for joining us. He just showed me a picture of another President -- well, two fathers kind of gathered together. And it's proud for two sons to be carrying on the legacy of conservation. He's made a really important movie that I hope people will watch about the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. I think the American people will understand better about why I made the decision I made when they see the movie that Jean-Michel has produced.

I want to thank Silvia Earle. She's a marine biologist. She's Explorer in Residence of the National Geographic Society. It was during the showing of the movie that she sat me down and gave me a pretty good lecture about life. (Laughter.)

She actually invited me to spend a week with her under the seas. (Laughter.) There's some in Congress who would like me to spend my lifetime under -- (laughter.)

I want to thank Mike Nussman. He's the President and CEO of American Sportfishing Association. Thanks for coming, Mike. I want to thank the guests from the environmental community who are here today. Thanks for your hard work on this vital issue.

The vibrant beauty of the oceans is a blessing to our country. And it's a blessing to the world. The oceans contain countless natural treasures. They carry much of our trade; they provide food and recreation for billions of people. We have a responsibility, a solemn responsibility, to be good stewards of the oceans and the creatures who inhabit them.

In 2004, my administration released an ocean action plan to promote an ethic of responsible use and stewardship for our oceans and coastal resources. By establishing this new National Monument, we implement an important part of our plan, and we accomplish three goals for the nation: First, this new national monument will honor our commitment to be good stewards of America's natural resources.

Our duty is to use the land and seas wisely, or sometimes not use them at all. Good stewardship of the environment is not just a personal responsibility, it is a public value. Americans are united in the belief that we must preserve our natural heritage and safeguard the environment. (Applause.) This belief has affirmed our laws, and today we reaffirm that commitment once again.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are a beautiful and special place. The 10 islands and atolls stretch over 1,400 miles. That's the distance from Chicago to Miami. In the tropical waters surrounding the archipelago, there are more than 4,500 square miles of coral reef habitat thriving under the surface. Think about that -- 4,500 square miles of coral reef. These undersea forests and mountain ranges comprise the largest remote reef system in the world. And this region holds the largest and healthiest untouched coral reef system in the United States. And we're going to preserve it.

These reefs burst with life: Great predators, like the white tip reef shark and the spinner dolphins and the Trevally jacks. The archipelago is home to more than 7,000 marine species. That's a quarter of which are found nowhere else on the world. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are also the primary home for nearly 1,400 surviving Hawaiian Monk Seals. That's virtually the entire population of this critically endangered species. They are the breeding grounds for approximately 90 percent of the threatened Hawaiian Island Green Sea Turtle population.

I think you're beginning to get a feel for why I made the decision I made. The national monument we're establishing today covers nearly 140,000 square miles. To put this area in context, this national monument is more than 100 times larger than Yosemite National Park, 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. (Applause.)

We will preserve access for native Hawaiian cultural activities. As part of the proclamation, the Department of the Interior and the Department of Commerce will work with the state of Hawaii and the public to develop a plan to manage the monument. This proclamation will also charge NOAA to use its expertise to oversee the new marine areas and the Fish and Wildlife Service to apply their skills to the wildlife refuge areas.

Within the boundaries of the monument, we will prohibit unauthorized passage of ships; we will prohibit unauthorized recreational or commercial activity; we will prohibit any resource extraction or dumping of waste, and over a five-year period, we will phase out commercial fishing, as well. For seabirds and sea life, this unique region will be a sanctuary for them to grow and to thrive. And for the American people, it will be a place that honors our responsibility to protect our natural resources.

This new monument shows what cooperative conservation can accomplish. My administration is committed to working in a spirit of respect and cooperation with those seeking to protect our land, and sea, and sky. We believe cooperative conservation is the best way to protect the environment. This means we must focus on the needs of states, and respect the unique knowledge of local authorities, and welcome the help of private groups and volunteers.

Through cooperative conservation, we're moving away from the old environmental debates that pit one group against another, and towards a system that brings citizens of every level of government together to get results. In the northwest Hawaiian Islands, we have worked with Governor Lingle and state officials, and native Hawaiian leaders to ensure, first

and foremost, that they wanted the monument, and, secondly, to make sure that we protect the cultural and historical heritage of these islands.

For more than a thousand years, native Hawaiians sailed these waters and visited these islands as part of sacred journeys. The islands are dotted with archeological treasures and traditional sites of worship. This monument will protect the cultural ties that native Hawaiians have to these lands and waters. We respect these natives' beliefs, and this monument will safeguard both the natural and spiritual treasures of the region. (Applause.) And for this reason, we will consult with native Hawaiian leaders to give this monument a native Hawaiian name.

Protecting the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, volunteers play an important part. Jean-Michel taught us that in his movie. Through a major federal-state partnership, volunteer divers work together to remove nets and gear that have been abandoned by fishermen. In one year alone, divers removed more than 120 tons of this derelict fishing gear. To fight the destructive effects of abandoned nets and other debris, the Ocean Action Plan directed the Coast Guard and EPA and NOAA and the State Department and the Interior Department to coordinate efforts to improve how the federal government tracks, prevents, and cleans up maritime waste. And we've got more work to do. And I expect these agencies to be robust in our efforts to prevent this kind of debris from polluting our -- polluting this sanctuary, this monument.

We're going to work together with volunteers to make our oceans safer for marine life. And to give this remote and special place our nation's highest level of protection -- as we give it this kind of protection, we're also reminded of our responsibility to be wise managers of marine resources living off every coast. And that's why we're working to end over-fishing. Over-fishing is harmful. It's harmful to our country, and it's harmful to the world.

To protect our marine ecosystem and the future fishing of all kinds, the Ocean Action Plan calls for Congress to reauthorize the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. They need to get that done. This act would provide enhanced authority to work with regional fish councils to build an improved market-based system to restore our fisheries. I like to fish, and I expect this government of ours to protect the fisheries so sports people can fish and get a good catch. That's why I'm glad the sportsmen are here -- Sportfishing people are here. You know, you just got to understand, we're going to listen to you. It's in the nation's interest that we have a robust recreational fishing industry.

Congress needs to move forward with my administration's plan to build a well-managed system of offshore aquaculture. Aquaculture, or "fish farming," uses pens in the ocean -- open ocean to feed and grow shrimp, shellfish, and many other types of fish. And when we get this right, these farmed fish can provide a healthy source of food and reduce pressure on the ocean ecosystems.

In the Northwest Hawaiian Islands, we're also preserving an historic landmark of great importance. Near the northern edge of these islands lies Midway Island, the site of one of the most decisive battles of World War II. On this atoll, there's a memorial to the sacrifice and valor of those who fought in the Pacific theater during World War II. This national monument will have special access area around Midway Island. That's what we want. We want people to go and pay homage to those who sacrifice for our freedom.

Third, the new national monument creates a new opportunity for ocean education and research for decades to come. Successful ocean stewardship depends on informed policy makers and an informed public. One of the key priorities of the Ocean Action Plan is promoting ocean education. Jean-Michel put it this way, he said, "How can we protect what we don't understand?" Ninety-five percent of our planet's oceans have yet to be explored. We're just beginning to appreciate what the seas have to offer humanity. The waters of this new national monument will be a living laboratory that offers new opportunities to discover new life, that helps us better manage our ocean ecosystems, and allows us to pursue advances in science.

You know, in America, there's a great consensus that we have an obligation to be good stewards of the environment. Success of a generation is not defined by wealth alone. We also will be measured by the respect we give to the precious creatures of our natural world.

We have great choices before us in this country. And with the designation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Island Marine National Monument, we are making a choice that will leave a precious legacy.

I want to thank you all for joining us today. It's an historic moment. Thank you all for your leadership. And may God

bless the country. (Applause.)

(The proclamation is signed.) (Applause.)

END 2:50 P.M. EDT

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