

Kiribati Expands Phoenix Islands Protected Area, Creating World's Largest MPA

The Pacific island nation of Kiribati has more than doubled the size of its Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), creating what is being called the world's largest marine protected area. The expanded MPA, announced by the Government of Kiribati in late January 2008, now encompasses an area of 410,500 km² - up from 184,700 km².

The vision for the PIPA remains the same as when the site was designated in 2006: commercial fishing will be phased out, although subsistence reef fishing by the fewer than 50 residents of the Phoenix Islands archipelago will be allowed to continue (*MPA News 7:9*). The protected area was developed by Kiribati in cooperation with the New England Aquarium over several years of joint research, with funding and technical assistance from Conservation International (CI). Designated to protect the nation's near-pristine coral reef ecosystem, the PIPA is located halfway between Australia and Hawai'i in the Central Pacific.

Tebwe letaake, secretary of the Kiribati environment ministry, says there was no conscious plan to double the size of the MPA. Rather, the expansion allows for greater conservation opportunities. "The new boundaries address two fundamental considerations," says letaake. "One was to include two reefs, Winslow and Carondelet, that were outside the 60-mile offshore boundary set around the islands [in 2006]. Second was to make the boundaries more easily described and suitable for navigators by adopting straight-line coordinates rather than circular 60-mile radius coordinates." The expanded MPA also includes tuna spawning grounds, seamounts, and deep sea habitat that were formerly outside its limits.

Although Kiribati is the largest atoll nation in the world, it is geographically isolated. This isolation has historically insulated the nation from outside threats. But foreign fishing fleets have expressed growing interest in its waters, and climate change looms. Sea level rise is a major concern for this low-lying nation, and a prolonged drought has threatened domestic water supplies.

Prior to the PIPA expansion, the 362,000-km² Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (U.S.) was widely considered to be the world's largest MPA, followed by the 344,400-km² Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in Australia. Depending on how one defines "marine protected area", however, other (larger) marine areas could also be considered, like the 70 million-km² Indian Ocean Whale Sanctuary ("Which MPA Is the World's Largest?", *MPA News 8:2*).

Funded by endowment

The PIPA will be financed through an endowment being initiated with private funding by CI's Global Conservation Fund. The endowment will grow with matching funds from private and public institutions, and will be similar to ones enacted by CI to protect South American rainforests. It will be overseen by a board of managers including CI, the Government of Kiribati, New England Aquarium, and others.

Sue Miller-Taei, CI's marine program manager for Pacific Islands, says the PIPA endowment will have three functions:

- Support the costs of managing the protected area;
- Cover the costs of operating the financing vehicle that holds the endowment; and
- Compensate the Government of Kiribati for lost revenue suffered from cancellation of fishing licenses to foreign tuna fleets.

How large the endowment needs to be to cover these costs will be the focus of discussions this month in Kiribati, says Miller-Taei. As the endowment grows, fishing effort will be phased out. "CI has an initial secured commitment from its Global Conservation Fund for US \$2.5 million," she says. "We have a range of other private, multilateral, and bilateral donors interested in supporting the PIPA endowment." She says that the years of planning and the partnerships already in place - as well as the PIPA's profile as the world's largest MPA - will all aid in the fundraising.

Miller-Taei says a key challenge will come in deciding how, in space and time, to phase out the fishing effort. "This will involve working with a range of types of agreements and license arrangements - from annual license fees for distant-water fishing fleets, to multilateral fishing treaties," she says.

The Government of Kiribati anticipates that the expanded PIPA will help draw more tourists to the archipelago. "I am optimistic about the future of tourism development in Kiribati," says letaake. "It is one of the untouched, undisturbed places on Earth. The PIPA will enhance the development potential of Kiribati as a place to visit, starting first with cruise lines bringing tourists." Kiribati includes two other, more-populated island groups in addition to the Phoenix Islands.

The PIPA website is <http://phoenixislands.org>.

For more information

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