

US Creates World's Second Largest MPA

President Clinton has designated a vast marine protected area around the coral-laden Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) -- an MPA that now ranks as the largest protected area (either terrestrial or marine) in the US and the second largest MPA in the world. Clinton's designation of the MPA in early December followed a 90-day public consultation process -- ordered by the president last May ([MPA News 1:9](#)) -- to develop recommendations for increasing protection of the NWHI's coral ecosystems. The NWHI contain nearly 70% of US coral reefs.

The newly created Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve spans 340,000 sq. km (84 million acres). The Great Barrier Reef Marine Park, widely considered to be the world's largest MPA, is only slightly larger at 350,000 sq. km.

The state of Hawaii will retain its jurisdiction out to three nautical miles from the shore of most of the NWHI islands. The new reserve will extend from the seaward boundary of Hawaii state waters to 50 nautical miles from the geographic center of the NWHI chain's islands. The reserve will be overseen by the National Marine Sanctuary Program of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), an agency within the Department of Commerce.

"Reserve preservation areas"

Under Executive Order #13178, by which Clinton created the MPA, the reserve will feature 15 "reserve preservation areas". Encompassing roughly 16,000 sq. km, or 5% of the reserve, these relatively shallow areas will be off-limits to most commercial and recreational fishing, anchoring, and collecting or touching of coral. The NWHI's existing bottomfishery will be allowed to continue in 8 of the 15 areas. NOAA considers the NWHI's managed bottomfish species to be healthy, and the number of active vessels in the fishery ranges from 3 to 13 annually.

The remaining 95% of the reserve covers largely deep water areas. In this section of the reserve, all commercial and recreational fishing will be capped at current or recent levels. The effect on fishing activities of this regulation may be limited: pelagic fishing is already prohibited within a 50 nautical mile zone around the NWHI, and a precious corals fishery is not currently active.

Oil, gas, and mineral production in the reserve -- though nonexistent in the case of oil and gas, and very limited for minerals -- will be banned, as will be any removal of coral throughout the reserve.

The NWHI's approximately 2000-km stretch of coral islands, seamounts, banks, and shoals feature some of the healthiest coral reefs in the US. The vast area supports more than 7000 marine species, of which approximately half are endemic to the Hawaiian Island chain. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are mostly uninhabited.

Reserve operations plan to come

Under the executive order, the Secretary of the Department of Commerce must seek public comment on the order's conservation measures (comment period ends 8 January 2001), and develop a reserve operations plan, in consultation with other federal and state officials.

Technically, Clinton's ordered conservation measures -- including the reserve preservation areas -- are temporary until made permanent by the reserve operations plan. Potentially, some of the reserve preservation areas could remain open to fishing if the Secretary deems such action appropriate.

The Secretary must establish a multistakeholder reserve council to ensure continued input in the ongoing management of the reserve. The council will include representatives from the Native Hawaiian, scientific, environmental, education, fishing, and tourism communities, as well as state and federal officials. In addition, the Secretary is responsible for initiating a process by which the reserve would be considered for future designation as a national marine sanctuary.

Impacts on fisheries

The new reserve may have the effect of shutting down a small, limited-entry fishery for lobster in the NWHI, which has primarily fished in what are now designated the "reserve preservation areas". The lobster fishery has been somewhat controversial in the NWHI: some environmentalists have accused it of having negative impacts on monk seals. In late 2000, a court shut down the lobster fishery indefinitely due to lack of information on the fishery's impacts on seals.

Roger Griffis, a NOAA policy advisor, said the reserve preservation areas were selected largely for two reasons: they were judged to be the most sensitive coral reef habitats, and they feature foraging and breeding areas for endangered species, particularly monk seals.

Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, supports the idea of the reserve, but is frustrated with what she sees as its heavy-handed treatment of NWHI fisheries. She favors continuing the lobster fishery, and is concerned that the closed areas would negatively impact the bottomfishery as well.

"Roughly 35% of the bottomfishery would be closed down based on the executive order," said Simonds. "People figure that the fishermen can just go out further [from the reserve preservation areas] to fish, but there are steep drop-offs. We have no continental shelf."

Integrated management

KAHEA -- an alliance of Native Hawaiian activists and cultural practitioners working to protect cultural rights and the environment -- is concerned that Clinton's proposed protections may not go far enough. Cha Smith, KAHEA's organizational coordinator, states that the extent to which bottomfishing will still be allowed in some of the closed areas will pose an unnecessary threat to reefs and seals.

"There are only four boats actively fishing in the bottomfishery," said Smith. "One option would be for the government to buy them out." She said enforcement of the new restrictions would be key, and that vessel monitoring systems on all boats entering the reserve -- suggested as a management option in the executive order -- would be a good idea.

Whatever elements eventually make it into the reserve operations plan, NOAA's Griffis said it would be critical for the federal and state governments to work closely to integrate their coral reef management efforts. Some experts have estimated that Hawaii's waters surrounding the NWHI contain as much coral as the new federal MPA does.

"The state's coral is the shallowest and the most sensitive [in the NWHI]," said Griffis. "We are hoping and anticipating that the state will be an integral partner -- our goal is to create a coordinated and seamless management plan." The state of Hawaii initiated its own process in 2000 to determine management priorities for its NWHI waters.

For more information:

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Box: Executive Order on Web

President Clinton's executive order to designate the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve is available on the web, at <http://hawaiiireef.noaa.gov/>.

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