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From the Los Angeles Times

Bush to Create World's Largest Marine Sanctuary

Plan to protect 140,000 square miles of Pacific Ocean from fishing and coral mining is a dramatic departure for the administration.

By Kenneth R. Weiss
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8:31 PM PDT, June 14, 2006

President Bush today will create the world's largest marine protected area, a total of 140,000 square miles of Pacific Ocean surrounding a necklace of islands and atolls that stretch from the main Hawaiian Islands to Midway Atoll and beyond, senior administration officials said.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Monument will be larger than all of America's national parks combined. Fishing will be phased out, and the mining of coral for jewelry will be prohibited, along with other practices that can damage delicate reefs.

"With a stroke of pen, the president not only can accomplish the single largest act of conservation in U.S. history, but he can inspire the American public on the broader importance of our ocean and coastal environments," said a senior administration official who requested anonymity so as to not upstage Bush's announcement today.

The decision is a turnaround for the Bush administration, which five years ago considered stripping more limited protections from the area that President Clinton had declared a coral reef ecosystem reserve. It's also a sharp departure for an administration that has pushed to privatize some federal lands and designated less wilderness than most presidents over the past 40 years.

A turning point came in April, when Bush sat through a 65-minute private White House screening of a PBS documentary that unveiled the beauty of -- and perils facing -- the archipelago's aquamarine waters, its nesting sea birds, sea turtles and sleepy-eyed monk seals, which face extinction.

The film seemed to catch Bush's imagination, according to senior officials and others in attendance. The President popped up from his front-row seat after the screening, congratulated filmmaker Jean-Michel Cousteau, son of underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau, and urged the White House staff to get moving on protecting these waters.

"He was enthusiastic," Cousteau said. "The show had a major impact on him, the way my father's shows had on so many people. I think he really made a discovery -- a connection between the quality of our lives and the oceans."

The northwest Hawaiian Islands are a collection of reefs and 10 points of emergent lands -- islands, atolls and pinnacles. Although the total emergent land-mass is small, the isolation has kept these islands relatively undisturbed and increased their importance to wildlife.

About 14 million sea birds, including albatross and various species of terns, nest on these islands. Pods of spinner dolphins frolic in lagoons, leaping ahead of boats and making full twists in the air.

About 90% of Hawaii's green turtles nests in these remote beaches, as do nearly all monk seals. So far, scientists have identified about 7,000 species in the Hawaiian Islands, about one third of which are found nowhere else in the world.

All of these islands are part of the state of Hawaii, except for Midway Atoll, the site of the historic World War II battle, which is a U.S. territory. The United States has the power to control fishing in its Exclusive Economic Zone, which extends 200 miles from the nearest point of land.

Bush's decision was strongly encouraged by Hawaii's Gov. Linda Lingle, a Republican. She signed rules last year to ban fishing in state waters around these remote atolls and urged Bush to extend protections to federal waters. Protection of the northwest Hawaiian Islands has emerged as a widely popular move, receiving more than 50,000 letters of support over the last five years. These islands have no resident fishermen who might be hurt by tightening rules. Only a remnant fleet of eight commercial boats now makes the long cruise from the main Hawaiian Islands to fish the reefs for snappers and grouper -- often a marginal operation given soaring fuel prices.

At today's White House ceremony, the president will invoke the 1906 Antiquities Act for the second time in his presidency. The only other time was to declare an burial ground in lower Manhattan as one of the nation's ancient cultural sites. The site, where about 20,000 slaves and free blacks were buried in the 18th century, is only about half an acre.

Bush's declaration today will be on a much larger scale. The strip of protected ocean, about 1,400 miles long and 100 miles wide, will dwarf all of the nation's marine sanctuaries as well as national parks on land.

Initially, Bush was going to propose that the area be protected as a national marine sanctuary. But he wanted to move faster, a senior official said.

"Because it's a presidential action, under the authority of a congressional act, it becomes law immediately without going through a prolonged rule-making process and the inevitable legal action that follows," a top aide said. "We can immediately begin with protection and management."

Bush in recent weeks enlarged the boundaries of the new marine protected area, giving him bragging rights for creating the largest marine protected area in the world. At 139,793 square miles, it will be bigger than Australia's 128,960 square mile Great Barrier Reef Marine Park.

"This is the best thing that President Bush has done for the environment since he took office," said Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute. "Having discussed this with him, I know that the president is personally committed to this."

Norse was one of the 50 guests who watched Bush's excitement after the screening of Cousteau's "Voyage to Kure" in the White House. Bush and his wife, Laura, were amazed at photos of the Northwest Hawaiian Islands that appeared in National Geographic Magazine, an aide said.

Afterward, the president had dinner with Cousteau, National Geographic Explorer-in-residence Sylvia Earle and other marine scientists and advocates.

Bush was surprised, as are many Americans, that national marine sanctuaries do not forbid fishing except in specially designated areas. That evening, he repeatedly asked James L. Connaughton, chairman of the White House Council on Environmental Quality, how this new marine protected area could end fishing.

That same question has bedeviled the proposed expansion of no-fishing zones in the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary off Southern California. In 2002, California banned fishing in 175 square miles of state waters and has urged federal officials to extend those no-fishing zones into federal waters. Little has happened since then, except for strong objections from the industry-dominated regional fishery management council.

Even as a new monument, however, the area won't be immune from the infighting that goes on between wildlife managers and fishery management council, which jealously guards its control over commercial fishing.

Kitty Simonds, director of the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, has long opposed any change of status that would further curtail fishing in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. She was unavailable for comment Wednesday.

The monument will phase out the remaining eight fishing boats over five years -- a timeline that conservation groups hope to accelerate by buying out the fishing permits.

The Pew Charitable Trusts has brought in a retired judge in Hawaii to broker a deal with fishermen, who in 2003 caught about \$1.3 million in snappers and groupers, for a net profit of only \$300,000.

"For a buyout to work, it will have to include all of the permit holders," said Joshua S. Reichert, director of Pew's environmental division. Reichert said conservation groups do not want to buy out some of the fishermen only to have the others increase the amount of their catch.

"Although it seems that eight fishing vessels cannot do much damage, we know it can in fragile areas like the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands," Reichert said.

As an example, he pointed out the history of eight commercial boats that caught an estimated 15 million spiny lobster and slipper lobster around the island chain from 1977 to 1998. The lobster populations crashed, wildlife biologists said, robbing newly weaned Hawaiian monk seals of an important, easy-to-catch food.

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