

2. OCEANS:

Obama establishes world's largest marine reserve

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Published: Thursday, September 25, 2014

This story was updated at 3:32 p.m. EDT.

President Obama created the world's largest marine reserve today, drastically increasing the size of a remote national monument in a move that conservationists hope is part of a larger federal focus on oceans.

The Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument will grow to almost six times its current size, to about 490,000 square miles. Commercial fishing, deep-sea mining and all other "resource extraction" activities will be banned, though recreational and traditional fishing will get an exception.

It's a step that allows the administration to make a significant conservation statement with relatively little controversy. Not only did Republican President George W. Bush create the original monument in 2009, it is farther from human populations than any other U.S. area. And it contains a wealth of biodiversity, including sea turtles, manta rays, sharks and a species of whale first discovered this year.

The question is whether the move signals the beginning of broader oceans protection, an issue that Secretary of State John Kerry and White House adviser John Podesta have championed ([Greenwire](#), June 16).

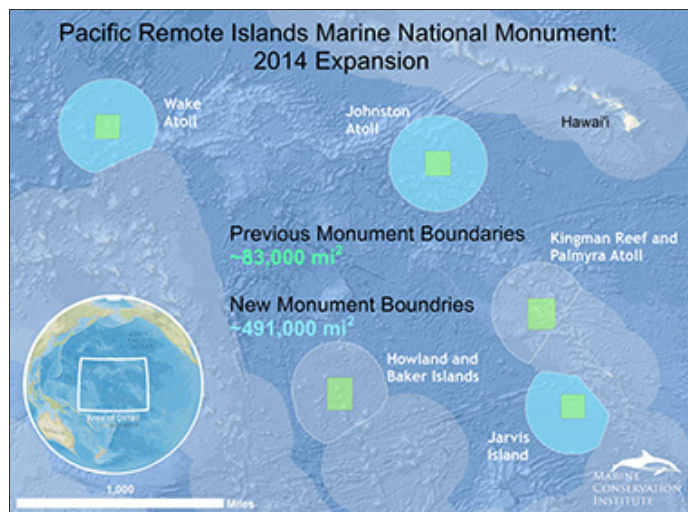
"If it's one-off, it's a fantastic one-off. We need more such one-offs," said Elliott Norse, the chief scientist at the Marine Conservation Institute who worked with Bush to create the original monument. "But if it's part of a coordinated strategy ... if [Obama] is sending the message that we're going to take this seriously now, I salute him. I say he is a Rooseveltian."

Obama expanded the monument through the Antiquities Act, which will draw criticism from conservatives who say it is an abuse of executive power. The move means the area is not legally a "marine sanctuary" -- which only the secretary of Commerce can designate through a required public process -- but the protections are among the most stringent.

House Natural Resources Chairman Doc Hastings (R-Wash.), who has criticized the administration for regulations on federal lands, called the move a "secret, unilateral action" that imposes "ocean zoning."

But the administration appears undeterred in taking executive action to implement environmental priorities.

Today, Kerry indicated that the administration intends to follow through on oceans issues, telling attendees of the U.N. General Assembly meeting that the United States "has not stopped working" since State's Our Ocean conference in June.



[+] President Obama announced today the expansion of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, with new boundaries around three islands, shown above. Map courtesy of the Marine Conservation Institute.

In addition to today's announcement on the monument expansion, Kerry said the administration is "laser-focused" on moving forward the Port State Measures Agreement, which the Senate approved earlier this year. The agreement -- which is a commitment to end illegal fishing -- has been ratified by 11 of the 25 countries needed to go into effect.

"But despite these steps, we approach this pretty clear-eyed. Agreements won't matter if no one's enforcing them. And [marine protected areas] are not going to be effective if no one's monitoring them," Kerry said. "And the kind of enforcement that we're going to need is going to take training; it's going to take resources."

Jacqueline Savitz, the vice president for U.S. oceans at environmental group Oceana, called

the expanded monument a "clear signal" that the administration sees the importance of protecting oceans.

"This unprecedented protection is an important step to rebuilding fishery abundance in the Pacific Ocean, which will in turn help to feed the world's growing population," she said in an email. "We hope the Obama administration will also stay true to its commitment to address seafood fraud and illegal fishing in the months ahead."

Many environmentalists celebrated what they described as historic news, but Pacific fisheries managers criticized the decision.

The monument, green groups said, would provide a place where wildlife can live undisturbed, including millions of seabirds that travel hundreds of miles from uninhabited islands to catch fish. Nearly untouched now, the monument's designation aims to ensure it stays that way.

Michael Conathan, the director of ocean policy at the Center for American Progress (CAP), called the monument expansion a "Yosemite moment." Carol Browner, the former U.S. EPA administrator who is now a senior fellow at CAP, declared it a "signature conservation victory."

The move also shows bipartisan effort, since Obama is building on Bush's work, said Emily Woglom, vice president for conservation and policy at the Ocean Conservancy.

"Simply put, we protect today what's important for tomorrow. That means we all win by the Obama Administration creating the world's largest marine monument, because protecting our ocean now is the investment that will pay dividends for generations to come," she said in an email. "Science shows that protected areas in the ocean help rebuild fish populations, which is good for fishermen, and provide habitat for many unique ocean animals, including whales, sharks, tuna and corals."

But Pacific fishery managers don't see it that way. Though the area currently sees little fishing activity, the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council has argued that the expanded monument puts unnecessary restrictions on an area already pristine and highly regulated.

In short, in the council's view, a national monument removes fishing as an option in the foreseeable future, even if climate change and warming waters mean fish could move and make the area more important to fishing.

Obama -- perhaps in a compromise to fishermen -- did not make the monument as big as possible. The Marine Conservation Institute estimated that the monument could be as big as 755,000 square miles, expanding protected areas around five islands to the edge of the so-called exclusive economic zone that marks the limit of U.S. control.

Instead, Obama protected about 65 percent of the possible area, expanding the monument to the exclusive economic zone for only three islands: Johnston Atoll, Wake Atoll and Jarvis Island.

Paul Dalzell, a senior scientist with the Western Pacific Fishery Management Council, said the council "acknowledges the compromise."

But he also expressed frustration with the tendency of recent presidents to look to the Pacific to burnish their conservation legacy. Presidents Clinton, Bush and now Obama have all declared protected areas around Western Pacific islands.

"Can they not find some other place to color them blue?" he asked.

Dalzell also railed against assertions that creating such protected areas is part of a needed response to climate change. In a press release, the White House linked the expanded monument to improving ecosystem resilience in the face of ocean acidification and rising ocean temperatures.

"I think it's spurious," he said. "Climate change is happening anyway whether we like it or not, and ocean acidification is part of it. Just because you draw a line and declare it sacrosanct doesn't mean it's going to dodge the bullet."

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