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Gathering Place

Cha Smith

A monumental victory for NWHI protection

PRESIDENT Bush's [proclamation last week](#) establishing a monument for the federal waters of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) took everyone by surprise, but the process of seeking the fullest possible protection has been on track for the past six years.

From the beginning, designation as a national monument was the intent and goal of commercial and recreational fishers, native Hawaiian cultural practitioners and ordinary citizens who wanted to see these islands fully protected. Expanding the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's refuge was the most appropriate way of meeting the protection needs of this fragile and remote ecosystem.

Unfortunately, Sen. Daniel Inouye blocked that course of action in 1999, insisting on a six- to 10-year process to determine whether the Northwestern Islands should become the 14th marine sanctuary and if so, to what extent it should be protected.

Support for stringent protection in the NWHI has been unwavering. Even though a sanctuary was never seen as the appropriate vehicle for protection, the public has participated in good faith throughout this process. For six years, in more than 100 public hearings and in over 112,000 letters and faxes to federal and state officials, the public consistently called for 1) the strongest possible protection of our Kūpuna Islands, 2) recognition of native Hawaiian traditional cultural use, and 3) a ban on all commercial activities. Last fall, Governor Lingle established such a refuge in the state waters of the NWHI and encouraged equivalent protection for federal waters.

The Northwestern Hawaiian (Kūpuna) Islands are replete in native Hawaiian mythical lore, hold tremendous historic and cultural significance and are seen as a nursery for fish stocks in the main islands. Numerous Hawaiians have been deeply involved in protection efforts from day one. For these reasons, the Hawaiian community has been unified on the need to provide the greatest possible protections to this sacred place

THE SCIENCE also has been consistent and clear: This ecosystem is unique on the planet. It is essential to protect cool-temperature coral colonies because rising ocean temperatures are killing coral reefs at an alarming rate. The high-impact, eight-vessel commercial fishery now operating NWHI waters continues to take a serious toll on standing stocks of bottomfish, frequently interacting with endangered monk seals and turtles. These harms cannot be justified when NWHI bottomfish continue to fetch only \$2 per pound at

auction because they are one- to three-weeks old by the time they arrive in Honolulu.

Unlike a sanctuary, a monument designation provides the protections this precious environment needs and deserves. As Congressman Ed Case explained last year, "a sanctuary" is not really a sanctuary, but generally serves as a multi-use recreational area. It was difficult for the sanctuary program under the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to change its standard of allowing all activities to take place unless specifically prohibited.

MOREOVER, recently released DLNR documents noted that NOAA's draft sanctuary plan did not come close to meeting state's standards for NWHI protections. The islands needed and deserved more. A monument, where limited activity and access is jointly regulated by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and NOAA in close consultation with the state, ensures the necessary protection for the NWHI.

It is not surprising that Kitty Simonds, executive director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, wants an exception to monument protections. Wespac seems to pursue exceptions to every law that limits its ability to extract resources and expand profits. Wespac sought and received exceptions to the law in pursuit of egg-bearing females and juveniles, even as the lobster fishery crashed. During the sanctuary designation process, Wespac argued that harvesting precious coral and lobsters met the sanctuary's goal of protecting the coral reef ecosystem in its natural state. It is my hope that the current federal investigation of Wespac will recognize the chronic abuse of our federal tax money.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands has finally been awarded the permanent protection it deserves. It is a true Pu'uuhonua-- a national monument. May the plundering of our marine resources be halted with this proclamation!

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