



A Struggle to Preserve a Hawaiian Archipelago and Its Varied Wildlife

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MIDWAY ATOLL, Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument — As the pilot of the Coast Guard C-130 transport plane banks and circles over atoll after deserted atoll on a five-hour, 1,400-mile flight from Honolulu, the sheer emptiness of the world's largest nature reserve becomes starkly apparent.

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Linny Morris for The New York Times

REMOTE RESERVE A Coast Guard plane over Midway.

Yet two of the most powerful men in the world — first President [Bill Clinton](#) and then President Bush — struggled for eight years to upgrade the area into a true reserve, in a process that involved more than 100 public meetings and 52,000 public comments, most of them supportive. The main obstacle was a tiny, marginally profitable fishing fleet composed of eight boats and employing fewer than 20 people, most of them part-time, but vigorously defended by a powerful senator and an entrenched federal bureaucracy.

“Rarely have so many fought so hard for so long for so few,” said Jay Nelson, the Northwest Hawaiian Islands project director of the Pew Charitable Trusts and one of many environmentalists who worked to support the presidents’ efforts.

This national monument is so remote that only two dozen people at a time will be able to visit, and only here in Midway, one of two populated islands.

Though the combined land surface of what some officials call the American Galápagos is a minuscule 3,328 acres, just four times the size of Central Park, the coral surrounding them, in hues ranging from magenta to aquamarine, stretch out for miles from each atoll and total more than 5,000 square miles, larger than Connecticut.

This was the real stake: a vast collection of some of world’s least damaged reefs and the home to the endangered Hawaiian monk seal. Its population of about 1,200 is falling by 4 percent a year, so scientists at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration are

making extraordinary efforts to stem the decline. When twins were born in Midway this summer, the scientists, knowing that twins rarely survive in nature, captured them and

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took them to Honolulu, where they were fattened up with herring.

They were returned on this special Coast Guard flight to Midway, where they will be released, probably next spring, once they have accumulated enough blubber to survive the long process of learning to fend for themselves.

The archipelago also harbors some of the highest densities in the world of so-called apex predators, the sharks, groupers and jacks who have no natural predators of their own but whose numbers have been depleted elsewhere by fishermen. If all fishing stops, scientists say, these reefs could be returned to a truly pristine state within a decade.

“The islands don’t have as diverse marine life as, say, Indonesia, because they’re so far north,” extending up to the latitude of New Orleans, said Russell Brainard, NOAA’s chief coral reef scientist in [Hawaii](#). “But in terms of their size and the low level of interference from man, they’re already unique.”

With the exception of highly militarized Midway and Tern Island during World War II, the 10 islands or island groups have been nature reserves of one sort or another since [President Theodore Roosevelt](#) established the Hawaiian Islands Reservation in 1909. Today, under the tutelage of [Fish and Wildlife Service](#) biologists, the islands are slowly recovering from the depredations of humans and the plants and creatures they introduced, including rabbits, rats and ironwood.

What some jokingly call the second Battle of Midway began innocuously enough early in the second Clinton administration, when Interior Secretary [Bruce Babbitt](#) hired William Y. Brown, a former chairman of the Ocean Conservancy, and asked him to look into expanding the department’s role in protecting the oceans.

“It became clear that the most important coral reef complex in American waters that needed protection was the Northwest Hawaiian Islands,” Mr. Babbitt said in an interview.

The [Interior Department](#) includes the Fish and Wildlife Service, which had already banned fishing in the archipelago’s near reefs to a depth of 60 feet. Beyond that, the first three miles of water belonged to the State of Hawaii, which opposed an end to fishing, according to the Democratic governor at the time, Benjamin J. Cayetano. The waters extending from there to 200 miles were managed by NOAA, which is part of the Commerce Department.

Dr. Brown recalled that the islands were being intensively fished for lobster, and that Fish and Wildlife Service officials in Honolulu were saying there was nothing they could do about it since the fishing was in waters deeper than 60 feet. A second, smaller fishery of bottom fish like pink snapper and Hawaiian grouper was also being depleted, he said.

Mr. Babbitt had enlisted Mr. Clinton’s support for designating the islands a national monument, along with a dozen or so other places, and in 2000, Mr. Babbitt proposed the idea to Hawaii’s senior senator, Daniel K. Inouye. Mr. Inouye, the ranking Democrat on the Commerce Committee, replied with a strongly worded letter that Mr. Babbitt summarized as saying, “Don’t you dare.”

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