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First lady to reveal name of monument

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First lady Laura Bush, after a day of visiting a remote Hawaiian atoll yesterday, flew to Honolulu overnight and is to meet with Gov. Linda Lingle this morning to announce a Hawaiian name for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument.

Bush spent the entire day yesterday touring Midway Atoll, the most developed of the 10 islands and reefs of the monument. Among the tens of thousands of Laysan and black-footed albatross on the island, she said she was particularly pleased to have seen the lone short-tailed albatross, or golden gooney. The endangered seabird species primarily nests on Japan-owned islands to the west, but an occasional bird shows up at Midway.

"The short-tailed albatross, the only one. ... He's been here about five years. He's 20 years old. They know because he was banded in Japan on the island where he was," the first lady said in a statement posted on the White House Web site. She noted that U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service personnel have built decoys in hope of attracting other short-tails to establish a mating colony.

Bush said she was concerned by invasive weeds, such as the yellow-flowered verbesina, and the amount of plastic scattered on the island's coral sand. Most of the plastic comes from being snatched up from the ocean's surface by feeding seabirds, and much of it ends up being fed to chicks. Many of them die with their bellies stuffed with plastic cigarette lighters, bottle caps, toothbrushes and other material.

"So the goal, of course, eventually would be to restore these islands, restore the habitat that's here, be able to slowly remove the invasives, and, of course, pick up the plastic, and hopefully people everywhere in the world will do a better job of recycling plastic so it doesn't end up here. ... When you see it in person, it really brings home how even though these are such remote islands, we are all sort of connected," she said.

The first lady's visit has prompted organizations with interest in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to voice their concerns for the management of its 140,000 square miles of water, reefs and land.

The Hawaiian-environmental alliance Kahea said that in the eight months since the monument was established, there has been inadequate protective management by its three co-trustees, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the State of Hawai'i.

Kahea interim executive director Marti Townsend said that during the past year, the agencies have approved permits to let more than 340 people conduct activities in the island waters. Many were scientific research ventures, but they also included canoe paddling. Townsend said monument management lacks clear guidelines for what kinds of activities are appropriate, and what kinds of research are needed.

"Researchers are basically coming to the (state Board of Land and Natural Resources) and saying, 'This is what I want to do.' They (the trustees) need research priorities. They need to determine what kinds of research are needed to protect the resource," Townsend said.

"Alarmingly in the first quarter of 2007, the number of permit applications already surpasses the number for all of last year," Townsend said. "The resource is too fragile. It cannot recover from the pounding that is being allowed."



Laura Bush

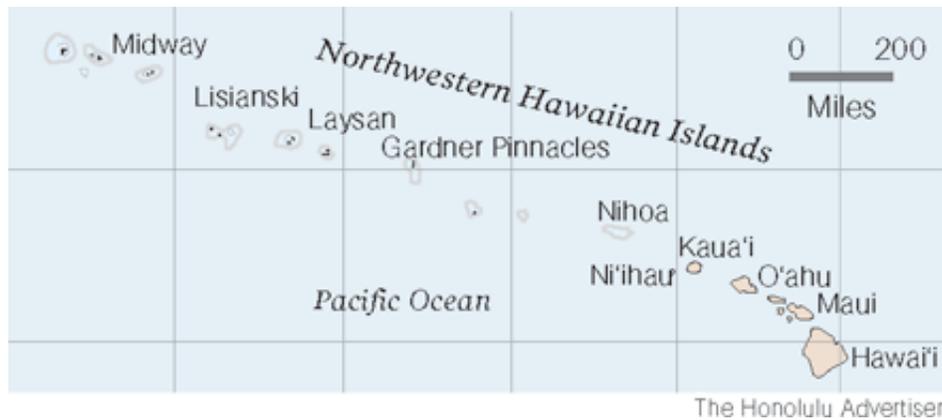
Among the unresolved long-term issues in the monument is lead-based paint that peels from 95 of Midway's aged buildings, and its impact on Laysan albatross young.

"Laysan chicks raised in nests close to buildings left behind by the Navy are ingesting lead-based paint chips. This is causing shockingly high lead concentrations in their blood, leading to severe neurological disorders, and eventual death," said American Bird Conservancy president George Fenwick. The conservancy estimates that as many as 10,000 chicks — 5 percent of all hatchlings each year — may die from complications of lead poisoning, which causes neurological problems.

The organization has called on the federal government to include lead paint cleanup in its 2008 budget.

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