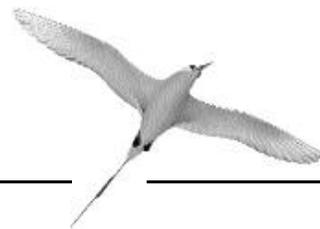


# NORTHWESTERN HAWAIIAN ISLANDS FACT SHEET



## Natural History:

- The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are a chain of small islands, atolls, submerged banks, and reefs stretching for more than 1,000 miles northwest beyond the main Hawaiian Islands.
- The 10 small islands that comprise the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands contain nearly 70 percent of all coral reefs within the waters of the United States. These remote reefs cover nearly 3,523 square miles and provide essential habitat for several commercial fisheries and countless indigenous and endemic reef species, many of which have yet to be 'discovered' and recorded by modern science.
- The islands that comprise this northern reef system include: Nihoa Island, Necker Island, Gardner Pinnacles, Maro Reef, Laysan Island, French Frigate Shoals, Lisianski Island, Pearl and Hermes Reef, Midway Atoll, Kure Atoll, and Emperor Seamounts.
- The small islands and atolls are home to more than 14 million Pacific seabirds, including nearly 100% of the world's Laysan and black-footed Albatross populations. More than 90 percent of the Hawaiian population of threatened green sea turtles nests in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, at French Frigate Shoals. The islands are also the breeding and feeding grounds for the endangered Hawaiian monk seal, of which only 1,400 animals remain.
- More than 7,000 marine species have been recorded from the Hawaiian Islands, including corals and other marine invertebrates, algae and sea grasses, fishes, sea turtles, and marine mammals. As many as half of the species in some of these groups exist **only** in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. These islands also serve as a source of marine life that helps restock the main Hawaiian islands.
- Most of the islands in the Northwestern chain were set aside by President Theodore Roosevelt in 1909 as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge. Kure Atoll has been protected as a State Wildlife Sanctuary since 1978.
- Most of the islands and atolls have been protected for almost 100 years, and their relatively intact marine and terrestrial communities offer us the opportunity to see what the ecosystems of the main Hawaiian Islands may have been like thousands of years ago, when the Polynesians first arrived.
- In recent decades, however, the islands and reefs have been degraded from the accumulations of thousands of tons of derelict fishing gear. Ship groundings and fuel spills have damaged reef habitats, and threaten to introduce alien species.



The Hawaii Coral Reef Initiative Research Program

**Cultural Heritage and History:**

- Numerous artifacts found on Nihoa establish a close relationship with the Hawaiian culture in the main Hawaiian Islands. As many as 175 people are estimated to have lived there during prehistoric times. Nihoa has up to 35 house terraces, 15 ceremonial structures, burial caves, bluff shelters and agricultural terraces that are thought to date from before the 13th century. In 1822, Queen Kaahumanu visited Nihoa and annexed it to the Kingdom of Hawaii, and in 1885, Queen Liliuokalani and her 200-person entourage visited the island.
- Artifacts on Necker (known to the Hawaiians as Mokumanamana) suggest the island was used in prehistoric times primarily for religious ceremonies. Many of the temple sites closely resemble those of the Marquesas Islands and Tahiti, possibly establishing a link between this site and early Polynesian cultures. The island was formally annexed to Hawaii in 1894. Both Nihoa and Necker Islands are on the National Registry of Historic Places.
- The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands have been fishing grounds for the people of Hawaii for centuries. Among the artifacts found on Nihoa are a fish shrine and a fish hook of the type used with a kaka rig to fish in the kialoa (deep water) for bottomfish. The logs of the earliest Westerners to visit Hawaii describe Native Hawaiian canoes headed to the northwestern islands for turtles and seabirds. Oral history says Nihoa residents occupied Nihoa each summer until the late 1800s. Olona fiber fishing lines from the period suggest bottomfish fishing took place.
- In the 1800 and 1900s, Western sailing ships exploited the area for seals, whales, reef fish, turtles, sharks, pearl oysters, and sea cucumbers. During this time, the islands were the site of numerous shipwrecks.
- The North Pacific Phosphate and Fertilizer Co. leased several islands for guano extraction. Bird skins and feathers were also harvested until the area was proclaimed a bird reservation in 1909. Development of land-based, commercial facilities was most significant on Laysan Island, where a small community existed in the 1890s, but harvesting also occurred on Lisianski Island.
- Midway was first settled in 1903 by employees of the Commercial Pacific Cable Company. Tons of imported soil and numerous introduced plants significantly altered the landscape. In the 1930s, Pan American Airways used Midway as a resting and refueling station for their Flying Clippers. A weather station was also established on the atoll.
- During World War II, the Navy built a base at Midway, dredging the reef to form a channel and Bishop Museum harbor. Eastern Island had the main airfield in the early days of the war, while submarine and seaplane operations were concentrated on Sand Island.