

World's largest marine protected area created in Pacific Ocean

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The small Pacific Island nation of Kiribati has become a global conservation leader by establishing the world's largest marine protected area – a California-sized ocean wilderness of pristine coral reefs and rich fish populations threatened by over-fishing and climate change.

The Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) conserves one of the Earth's last intact oceanic coral archipelago ecosystems, consisting of eight coral atolls and two submerged reef systems in a nearly uninhabited region of abundant marine and bird life. The 410,500-square-kilometer (158,453-square-mile) protected area also includes underwater mountains and other deep-sea habitat.

Kiribati first declared the creation of PIPA at the 2006 Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity in Brazil. On Jan. 30, 2008, Kiribati adopted formal regulations for PIPA that more than doubled the original size to make it the largest marine protected area on Earth.

Kiribati and the New England Aquarium (NEAq) developed PIPA over several years of joint scientific research, with funding and technical assistance from Conservation International's (CI) Global Conservation Fund and Pacific Islands Program. The CI support for PIPA is part of the Coral Reef Initiative in the South Pacific (CRISP).

“Kiribati has taken an inspirational step in increasing the size of PIPA well beyond the original eight atolls and globally important seabird, fish

and coral reef communities,” said Greg Stone, the NEAq vice-president of global marine programs. “The new boundary includes extensive seamount and deep sea habitat, tuna spawning grounds, and as yet unsurveyed submerged reef systems.”

Located near the equator in the Central Pacific between Hawaii and Fiji, the Phoenix Islands form an archipelago several hundred miles long. They are part of the Republic of Kiribati, which comprises three distinct island groups (Gilbert Islands, Phoenix Islands and Line Islands) with a total of 33 islands to make it the largest atoll nation in the world.

“The creation of this amazing marine protected area by a small island nation in the Pacific represents a commitment of historic proportions; and all of this by a country that is under serious threat from sea-level rise attributed to global warming.,” said CI President Russell A. Mittermeier. “The Republic of Kiribati has now set a standard for other countries in the Pacific and elsewhere in the world. We are proud to be associated with this effort that helps the people of Kiribati, and we call on governments and private conservation groups everywhere to support Kiribati in its efforts and make similar commitments to protect their own natural systems.”

The Phoenix Islands were featured in a major article in National Geographic in February 2004.

Three NEAq-led research expeditions since 2000 found great marine biodiversity, including more than 120 species of coral and 520 species of fish, some new to science. Some of the most important seabird nesting populations in the Pacific, as well as healthy fish populations and the presence of sea turtles and other species, demonstrated the pristine nature of the area and its importance as a migration route.

Protecting the Phoenix Islands means restricting commercial fishing in

the area, resulting in a loss of revenue that the Kiribati government would normally receive from issuing foreign commercial fishing licenses. NEAq and CI are helping Kiribati design an endowment system that will cover the core recurring management costs of PIPA and compensate the government for the foregone commercial fishing license revenues. The plan allows for subsistence fishing by resident communities and other sustainable economic development in designated zones of the protected area.

Keeping oceans and marine ecosystems intact and healthy allows them to better resist the impacts of climate change and continue their natural role of sequestering atmospheric carbon that causes global warming.

Source: Conservation International

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