

Move over, highways. Now you can sponsor an ocean sanctuary

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In a novel conservation strategy, the small South Pacific island state of Niue is offering individuals and institutions the opportunity to sponsor its marine sanctuary, home to pristine coral reefs, sharks, whales and hundreds of fish species.

For a one-time fee of \$148, you can sponsor a square kilometer of the Niue Moana Mahu Marine Protected Area, a 127,000-square-kilometer (49,000-square-mile) preserve that comprises 40% of Niue's territorial waters. Niue occupies a coral atoll that's about a third the area of New York City, but its 1,700 people control a swath of the ocean bigger than New Mexico.

Niue, a self-governing state in free association with New Zealand, aims to raise \$18 million from these "Ocean Conservation Commitments" to help finance the management of Moana Mahu. The island state bans [commercial fishing](#) and other resource extraction in the marine sanctuary, which it established in 2020. Funds raised from the commitments will be administered by the Niue and Ocean Wide Trust, a public-private nonprofit organization based in New Zealand.

"We think it should enable us to manage the marine protected area over a 20-year period and enhance enforcement and monitoring," Niue Premier Dalton Tagelagi told Bloomberg Green. Tagelagi said the initiative grew out of frustration with the lack of funding to support big marine protected areas, despite a United Nations target to protect 30% of the ocean by 2030.

"We're sick and tired of waiting on bilateral donors and partners who make promises at the UN conferences and big forums that we go to," Tagelagi said. "We think with the help of private business organizations and philanthropies and like-minded people, Ocean Conservation Commitments can maintain the sustainability of our [ocean](#) resources."

The National Geographic Society's Pristine Seas program helped Niue establish the Moana Mahu marine sanctuary. "Niue is a small country and it's surrounded by a lot of water, yet they decided to protect 40% of that water because they knew in the long term having that reserve would be of more benefit to them than exploiting it," said Enric Sala, a marine

scientist who is executive director of Pristine Seas. "We went back to Niue this year, several years after the creation of the reserve, and we saw an increase in the number of sharks and fish."

Some other Pacific island nations are abandoning or considering shrinking their marine sanctuaries. Kiribati, for instance, said in 2021 that it would dismantle its massive marine protected area due to a decline in fishing revenue and a lack of promised international funding to replace those earnings.

"We have noted that other countries have gone back on commitments to their marine protected areas for economic reasons, but I don't see us doing that," Tagelagi said. "If [Ocean Conservation Commitments] work out well, I think it can help all the other small developing island states."

The Niue government is kicking things off by sponsoring nearly 1,700 of its own Ocean Conservation Commitments, one for each of the island's residents. Tagelagi said that US-based environmental groups Conservation International and the Blue Nature Alliance and San Francisco crypto billionaire Chris Larsen and his wife Lyna Lam are also among those buying commitments.

Conservation International spokesperson Emmeline Johansen declined to disclose how many commitments her organization is sponsoring. "I can share that more than 15,000 Ocean Conservation Commitments have been sponsored by" Conservation International, Blue Nature, Larsen and Lam and others, "including many Niueans," Johansen said in an email.

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