

Ocean advocates push for Bermuda marine reserve (Update)

8 August 2013, by David Mcfadden



In this photo released by the non-government organization, The Pew Charitable Trusts, environmentalist Philippe Cousteau dives in the waters off Bermuda island, Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2013. Officials from The Pew Charitable Trusts and Philippe Cousteau, one of underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau's grandsons, are urging Bermuda to create the Atlantic's biggest marine reserve. The "Blue Halo" plan would safeguard parts of the Sargasso Sea, a major habitat for species including sharks and eels. (AP Photo/The Pew Charitable Trusts, Chris Burville)

Officials from the Pew Charitable Trusts and one of famed underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau's grandsons were in Bermuda on Thursday calling for the creation of the Atlantic's biggest marine reserve.

The ambitious "Blue Halo" plan would create a vast reserve in ecologically rich waters between the tiny mid-Atlantic territory's coastal fishing areas and its 200-mile (322-kilometer) exclusive economic zone boundary.

Advocates say it would safeguard significant parts of the Sargasso Sea, a 2 million-square-mile (3 million-square-kilometer) body of warm water in the Atlantic that is a major habitat and nursery for

numerous marine species. It would potentially start 50 miles (80 kilometers) from Bermuda's shore and ring the territory, ensuring that anglers could still fish offshore.

Bermuda is the only island within the Sargasso Sea, known for its mats of brownish Sargassum seaweed and as the spawning place for European and American eels.

Philippe Cousteau, an ocean campaigner who is frequently seen discussing marine issues on U.S. television, said the Blue Halo reserve would affect few Bermuda fishermen, since most don't venture beyond 25 miles (40 kilometers) from shore. If anything, he said, it would improve catches since research has indicated that fishermen eventually haul in bigger catches when a nearby marine reserve provides a safe haven for fish to grow.

Cousteau believes the plan would boost tourism, Bermuda's top economic driver along with offshore financial services.



In this photo released by The Pew Charitable Trusts, environmentalist Philippe Cousteau and his fiancée, entertainment journalist Ashlan Gorse, dive in the waters off Bermuda island, Wednesday, Aug. 7, 2013. Officials from The Pew Charitable Trusts and Philippe Cousteau,

one of underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau's grandsons, are urging Bermuda to create the Atlantic's biggest marine reserve. The "Blue Halo" plan would safeguard parts of the Sargasso Sea, a major habitat for species including sharks and eels. (AP Photo/The Pew Charitable Trusts, Chris Burville)

"I think it's something that Bermuda can really turn into a gem," Cousteau said during a phone interview from Bermuda, where he and Pew officials were meeting with officials, fishermen and others.

Derrick Binns, permanent secretary for Bermuda's Ministry of Environment & Planning, said in an email that the initiative "continues Bermuda's longstanding commitment to ensuring the sustainability of our marine environment."

He said the government will undertake a public consultation to evaluate the views of the territory's population.

"Upon consideration of those views, the government will then determine if such a marine protected area will be created, and if so, the location, size, shape and the nature of protections to be associated with it," he wrote.



In this Sept. 6, 2009 photo, a trumpetfish and a parrotfish, right, swim around coral at the Sargasso Sea, near Bermuda island. Officials from the non-governmental organization The Pew Charitable Trusts and Philippe Cousteau, one of underwater explorer

Jacques Cousteau's grandsons, were in the British territory of Bermuda on Thursday Aug. 8, 2013 calling for the creation of the Atlantic's biggest marine reserve. The ambitious "Blue Halo" plan would create a vast reserve in ecologically-rich waters between the tiny mid-Atlantic territory's coastal fishing areas, and its 200-mile (322-kilometer) exclusive economic zone boundary. (AP Photo/Courtesy Chris Burville)

Matt Rand, director of Pew Charitable Trusts' Global Ocean Legacy Campaign, said, "There has been strong community support for the Blue Halo during the many meetings and outreach efforts that Pew staff has been engaged in."

International scientists have called for at least 10 percent of the ocean to be placed in reserves to provide a buffer from the effects of overfishing, increasing acidification, coral bleaching and pollution. It's at less than 1 percent now, according to Pew.

But no-take reserves that expand on less-restrictive marine protected areas have gradually become a growing trend, with U.S. states and nations across the world barring fishing boats from areas.



In this Oct. 3, 2012 photo, seaweed floats in the Sargasso Sea, near Bermuda island. Officials from the non-governmental organization The Pew Charitable Trusts and Philippe Cousteau, one of underwater explorer Jacques Cousteau's grandsons, were in the British territory of Bermuda on Thursday, Aug. 8, 2013 calling for the creation of the Atlantic's biggest marine reserve. The ambitious "Blue Halo" plan would create a vast reserve in ecologically-rich waters between the tiny mid-Atlantic territory's coastal fishing areas, and its

200-mile (322-kilometer) exclusive economic zone boundary. (AP Photo/Courtesy Chris Burville)

Commercial and sport fishing interests have criticized some of these marine reserves, especially on the open sea, as unnecessarily restrictive and badly planned. The Billfish Foundation, a Fort Lauderdale, Florida-based anglers group, has been critical of the Blue Halo initiative.

"Shutting out anglers could spell a tremendous loss for the Bermudian economy and most critically, a loss of fishing opportunities for a community of anglers that strongly depend on Bermuda's marine resources," the group said in a statement last year.

But Cousteau, whose grandfather Jacques introduced TV viewers to an undersea world starting in the late 1960s, said since the large majority of fishermen don't travel beyond 25 miles (40 kilometers) from the coastline, Bermuda's exclusive economic zone has been left mostly open.

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