

# The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands: Should the Majority of Hawaii Waters Be Closed to Fishing?

When people think about State of Hawaii, they often think only about the eight southernmost islands, known as the main Hawaiian Islands, which span from the Big Island north to Kauai and Niihau. These islands, however, comprise only a small fraction of the Hawaiian Islands. The vast majority of the archipelago—approximately 1,200 miles of the 1,500-mile island chain—lies in the waters northwest of the main islands. These islands, atolls, banks and seamounts are known as the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

**T**he Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are a unique and special place. They are the breeding grounds for 96 percent of the world's black-footed albatrosses and 99 percent of the Laysan albatrosses. They are also home to the majority of Hawaiian monk seals, one of the most endangered marine mammals in the United States. French Frigate Shoals, one of the 10 major islands and atolls in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, accounts for 90 percent of the nesting beaches for the threatened Hawaii green sea turtle.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands also hold special cultural and historical significance. According to ancient Hawaiian chants, the gods (i.e., Pele and her brothers) traveled down the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to the main Hawaiian Islands. Necker Island (also known as Moku Manamana) and Nihoa Island were populated around 1,000 A.D. and today contain archaeological artifacts from these early settlements. For people outside of Hawaii, the most well-known place in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is Midway Atoll, the site of a famous World War II battle.

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands also hold special socioeconomic importance to the people of Hawaii. The deep-slope waters of these islands account for half of Hawaii's commercial bottomfish catches. These deepwater fish such as onaga and opakapaka (red and pink snapper) are particularly important to Hawaii residents as traditional foods to be shared during holidays. They are also featured in Hawaii's restaurants as signature dishes and part of

other U.S. Pacific islands) created a Protected Species Zone in waters 3 to 50 miles around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to eliminate longline interactions with the endangered Hawaiian monk seal by banning long-line vessels from this area. In 1994, the Council began preparing a Coral Reef Ecosystem Fishery Management Plan, which identified all federal waters out to 300 feet in depth in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as marine protected areas.

In 2000, President Clinton by Executive Orders 13178 and 13196 established the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve in the same offshore area that comprised the Protected Species Zone. At the time, many believed that the Northwestern

as a National Marine Sanctuary.

If the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands become a National Marine Sanctuary, it would add 135,000 square miles to the National Marine Sanctuary system. This would increase the total size of the existing Sanctuary system by sevenfold. This system currently contains 13 sanctuaries, all of which allow fishing except the 1/4-square-mile Fagatele Bay National Marine Sanctuary in American Samoa. The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Sanctuary would also be larger than the entire national parks system of the United States.

The draft environmental impact statement (DEIS) for the proposed Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Sanctuary is scheduled for public release in June 2006. It is anticipated that the DEIS will present a series of management alternatives for the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, including an option that allows limited commercial bottomfish and pelagic fisheries and a recreational fishery to operate under existing Fishery Management Plans (FMPs). Other alternatives would close all commercial and recreational fisheries after five years or by 2025.

Under the Council's current recommendations, the FMPs would allow no more than 14 commercial vessels to catch bottomfish in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. These vessels are restricted to 60 feet in length, and total bottomfish catch would be capped at 381,500 pounds. Longline fishing will continue to be banned, and three non-longline commercial pelagic vessels would be permitted to fish in the area. The total pelagic catch by the combined bottomfish and pelagic vessels would be 180,000 pounds. Recreational fishing would be allowed with federal permit and logbook requirements. Fishing for lobster, precious coral and coral reef fish would be prohibited, and a no-fishing marine protected area would be established around French Frigate Shoals and West of 174 deg. West longitude (i.e., in waters surrounding Kure and Midway Atolls as well as Pearl and Hermes Reef).

During the March 2006 Council meeting, members of the Council and the public stated that allowing limited, sustainable fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is the best use of the area. Research and monitoring has shown that the bottomfish and non-longline pelagic fisheries have virtually no impact on protected

species or the coral reef habitat and that stocks for both fisheries in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are healthy. In addition, banning fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands would likely result in increased imports from countries with fisheries that are less regulated and monitored (e.g., Tonga, Fiji, Philippines).

The proposed Northwestern Hawaiian Islands National Marine Sanctuary has often been compared to the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park. They are geographically about the same size, and the Great Barrier Reef is a World Heritage Site, which some hope the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands will also become. However, the Great Barrier Reef is by no means a no-fishing Reserve or Sanctuary, as some would like to see in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. Instead it is a multi-use marine park where each year 52.8 million pounds of seafood is harvested by the commercial sector alone, including trawl, coral reef line, inshore finfish and dive-based fisheries. In addition, more than 800,000 recreational fishers catch between 7.7 million to 9.5 million pounds of seafood; some 120 fishing charter vessels operate, ranging from large reef-going charter vessels to smaller inshore operators; and an unknown amount of indigenous fishing occurs.

## Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council

The Council is the policy-making organization for the management of fisheries in the exclusive economic zone (EEZ, generally 3–200 miles from shore) around the Territory of American Samoa, Territory of Guam, State of Hawaii, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands and U.S. Pacific island possessions—an area of nearly 1.5 million square miles. The Council is tasked with maintaining opportunities for domestic fishing while preventing adverse impacts to stocks, habitat, protected species and ecosystem resources.

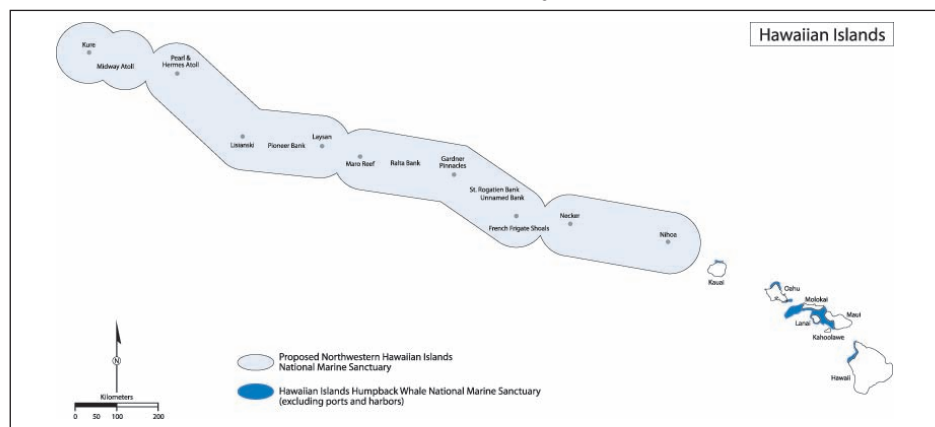


The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands accounts for half of Hawaii's local bottomfish landings. Pictured is a recent landing of Northwestern Hawaiian Islands bottomfish at the United Fishing Agency's fish auction in Honolulu.

In 2005, Governor Linda Lingle designated all State waters, 0 to 3 miles offshore, of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a marine reserve. No commercial or recreational fishing is allowed in the State reserve. If fishing is also banned in the proposed Sanctuary, it would be equivalent to banning fishing out to 100 miles offshore along the West Coast of the United States from Seattle to San Diego.

Many of Hawaii's fishermen, fish wholesalers and retailers, chefs and restaurant owners are adamantly against banning fishing from the majority of the waters surrounding Hawaii. They support continued sustainable fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands, managed under the Council and its FMPs. The challenge is to raise the awareness of consumers and the public about the existence of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and where the fish in Hawaii's stores and restaurants come from now and where they would come from if fishing is banned in the proposed Sanctuary.

The Council supports a sanctuary that provides for habitat protection as well as highly regulated and monitored fisheries. A Sanctuary for protected species and coral reefs can co-exist with limited, sustainable fisheries. After all, commercial fisheries have operated for a century in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and the area today is still considered "pristine."



the Hawaii regional cuisine. According to fish market auctioneer Wayne Higashi, "These freshly caught fish from Hawaiian waters are part of the exotic product of Hawaii, like pineapple and flora." Chef and restaurant owner Russell Siu (3660 On the Rise and Kakaako Kitchen) says these local bottomfish comprise about 30 percent of his menu.

The uniqueness of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands has been long recognized and has led to a series of actions to manage and protect this special area. In 1909, President Roosevelt designated the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as the Hawaiian Islands Bird Reservation. The Reservation eventually became the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge and the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge, under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. In 1978, a multi-agency, five-year program began to study the marine resources of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands. In 1991, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council (responsible for managing fisheries in federal waters 3 to 200 miles around Hawaii and



Northwestern Hawaiian Island bottomfish fishermen Troy Lanning of Kauai (center right), Bobby Gomes of Maui (far right) and Tim Timoney of Oahu (far left) with United Fishing Agency (i.e., Honolulu fish auction) manager Frank Goto.

Hawaiian Islands comprised about 70 percent of the U.S. coral reef habitat. A more comprehensive study in 2005 has corrected the data and documented that the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands accounts for approximately 10 percent of nation's coral reef habitat. Clinton's executive orders recognized existing fisheries in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands and provided for sustainable use of the area. The executive orders also initiated the process for designating the Reserve



**Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council**

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