



# The Return of Fishing to the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands

The Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) were historically visited by Native Hawaiians to fish and gather resources. Archaeological evidence of fish hooks and fishing shrines indicate that the islands were used for fishing from approximately 1,000 AD. The islands continued to be utilized by Native Hawaiians until the late 1800s, and following that by U.S. and foreign fishermen until the Fishery Conservation and Management Act passed in 1976. A tripartite study in the late 1970s led to



A ko'a, or fishing shrine on Nihoa, NWHI. Ko'a can be a stone, a pile of stones or a stone platform near shore. Photo: David Boynton. Source: Introduction: Hawaiian Fishing Traditions, Dennis Kawaharada, 2006.

a cooperative research program to identify NWHI marine resources and, in turn, fisheries for lobsters and deepwater bottomfish.

The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council's first fishery management plans were developed in response to the increasing fishery operations in the NWHI. Throughout the 1980s and into the 2000s, the Council established management measures in the NWHI including spatial management and limited-entry for bottomfish; no-take zones, gear restrictions, and quotas for crustaceans; no-take refugia and quotas for precious corals; and a protected species zone 50 nautical miles (nm) around the NWHI, within which longline fishing is prohibited. The latter became what is now known as the Papahānaumokuākea



Action Area. Source: NOAA.

Marine National Monument (PMNM).

Through a handful of Executive Orders and Presidential Proclamations, fishing in the NWHI became limited not by scientific justification or a lack of resources, but to appease conservation interests. The NWHI continued to provide fish for local communities until it was closed through the use of the Antiquities Act. However, Proclamation 9478 issued in 2016 allowed fishing to once again return to the NWHI as a regulated activity.

In December 2016, the Council held initial public scoping sessions on potential fisheries regulations for the Monument Expansion Area (50-200 nm) around the NWHI. Participants at these sessions wanted to ensure there was a streamlined permitting process, an allowance for research fishing and clear and enforceable regulations. The Council looked at potential options for fishing regulations in 2017 but decided to take no action at that time. In 2021, a push for a national marine sanctuary in the NWHI began to take shape and the Council was asked to provide fishing regulations for the same area of the Monument Expansion Area as prescribed under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

The Council is considering options to provide opportunities to once again fish in the NWHI. While the original

PMNM allows for sustenance fishing (catching and consuming within the monument), the Council's options for fishing in the Monument Expansion Area include catching and bringing fish back for noncommercial purposes. The Council may also consider whether customary exchange, or the nonmarket exchange of marine resources between fishermen and community residents, should be included.

The proposed fishery management measures for the Monument Expansion Area of the NWHI will need to be consistent with both Proclamation 9478 and the goals and objectives of the proposed national marine sanctuary. While the proclamation prohibits commercial fishing, the Council at its 192nd meeting in September may move forward to recommend NMFS implement regulations that prohibit commercial fishing and provide permits for noncommercial fishing. With the fishing regulations in the Code of Federal Regulations, there will be stronger enforcement and legal clarity for the area.

**Get involved!** Public comment is welcomed at the Council meeting and its other advisory group meetings. To find out more about this amendment, the meetings and public commenting opportunities for designating fishing regulations for the NWHI, visit [www.wpcouncil.org/nwhi-fisheries-2](http://www.wpcouncil.org/nwhi-fisheries-2) and participate in the Council process. 🐟