

We need to preserve America's rich investment in the seas

BY ADM. CONRAD C. LAUTENBACHER JR., OPINION CONTRIBUTOR - 07/26/17



This spring, President Donald Trump directed Secretary of the Interior Ryan Zinke to review many of the national monuments created under the Antiquities Act, which could open the door to eliminating protections for these iconic American places. The president called the designations or expansions that have occurred since 1996 “an egregious abuse of federal power,” and a barricade to economic growth, suggesting that states should decide what happens to these areas.

Secretary Zinke has already agreed not to remove the monument designation for two of the sites that were on the president’s original list of 27 — at least in part because of the strong community support these monuments had in Idaho and Washington, the states where they were located. Many of the other monuments have similar community support, including marine monuments.

The Antiquities Act was traditionally used to create monuments on public land. But in 2006, President George W. Bush — relying on the same legal authority — established the 140,000-square-mile (363,000-square-kilometer) Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument.

Reducing protections for this first park in the sea—and the four that have been created since — all located in the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, would be a serious disservice to America.

For one, a thriving, healthy ocean yields economic benefits that a damaged seascape simply cannot. Consider the case of Papahānaumokuākea, composed of islands and water that stretch northwest of the main Hawaiian Islands to Midway Atoll.

I was serving as the administrator of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) when President Bush established Papahānaumokuākea. For the next decade, the government and local parties — including the fishing industry, the food industry, educators, cultural practitioners, nonprofits, scientists, religious organizations, and veterans — worked together to expand the park by half, making it the largest marine protected area in the world.

Papahānaumokuākea, which means “a sacred area from which all life springs” in Hawaiian, is also one of the most biologically significant places on Earth—an American Galapagos that is home to more than 7,000 species, including four commercially important species of tuna. Such large fish need ample, unfettered areas to thrive and replenish. Simply put, underwater communities produce more and bigger fish when left alone.

We know that healthy fish populations mean greater economic returns. According to NOAA's 2015 Fisheries Economics Report, U.S. fisheries bring \$208 billion in sales and support more than 1.5 million American jobs.

Boosting fish populations in U.S. waters would also help address our seafood trade deficit, which is significant, since the latest estimates show that we fish-loving Americans import more than 80 percent of the seafood we consume. Supporting and growing our flourishing sea life makes sense if we want to reduce our imports of fish, especially because we have jurisdiction over more marine area than any other country.

Creating our marine monuments was the result of old-fashioned teamwork. Before President Bush established Papahānaumokuākea, my NOAA colleagues and I worked with many private sector partners — and each made their opinions, concerns, and priorities known. After five years of conversations and negotiations, we had a broad coalition of support for the president's action. Undoing this decision would undermine the hard work undertaken by many local leaders to protect their investment.

And to Native Hawaiians, Papahānaumokuākea is a sacred place. Caring for the land and the sea that feeds them, they believe, is their responsibility. They also believe that Papahānaumokuākea is where spirits return after death. To many Americans, the waters around Midway Atoll, which lies on the outer edges of the monument, are also a sacred place. The site of the pivotal World War II naval battle, considered the turning

point for the Pacific theater, serves as a final resting place for brave sailors and aviators who made the ultimate sacrifice and now rest on the seafloor.

On the other side of the country, off the coast of Cape Cod, the Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monument is also a story of diverse voices coming together to protect the country's heritage and long-term interest. As with Papahānaumokuākea, hundreds of thousands of commercial and recreational fishers, scientists, educators, business owners, divers, beachgoers, and members of faith-based organizations supported the permanent protection of these waters.

This marine monument, encompassing nearly 5,000 square miles (13,000 square kilometers), is the first in the U.S. Atlantic Ocean. Here, three massive undersea canyons drop thousands of feet. And four underwater mountains—or seamounts—rise higher than any mountain east of the Rockies.

The canyon walls and seamount slopes are refuge to stunning coral communities and a vast array of fish and wildlife. Surface water — rich in nutrients — attracts dolphins, sea turtles, seabirds, and rare North Atlantic right and sperm whales. Commercial extraction could throw off, or destroy, its delicate ecological balance. In addition, the New England economy, with its substantial tourism and recreation sectors, is intertwined with a healthy ocean.

While reviewing monument status, priority one should be ensuring that we have appropriately protected places for sea life to thrive, such as in Papahānaumokuākea and Northeast Canyons and Seamounts Marine National Monuments. We must recognize that destroying or harming ocean habitats, including through commercial uses, will severely reduce the rich dividends we are aiming to achieve. After all, once these sensitive habitats are damaged, they often can't be restored.

Because the United States is responsible for such a vast ocean area, we have a unique opportunity to safeguard the tremendous bounty of the sea. Instead of removing protections, we should be asking how we can add to our investment in a healthy ocean by expanding our existing marine monuments.

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