

## **State Establishes Marine Refuge in Northwestern Hawaiian Islands**

Governor Linda Lingle and Peter Young, Board of Land and Natural Resources Chair recently signed the regulations that establish all State waters in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands (NWHI) as a marine refuge.

“These rules set in motion the most significant marine conservation initiative in the history of the State by creating the State’s largest marine refuge,” said Governor Linda Lingle.

The refuge puts all State waters from Nihoa, the tiny island beyond Niihau and Kauai, to Kure Atoll, the northernmost land mass in the Hawaiian chain into a limited access, no extraction marine refuge.

The rules set aside 100 percent of State waters from extractive uses, including commercial and recreational fishing, and require an entry permit for all other activities.

Continuance of Native Hawaiian traditional and customary practices will be allowed in the refuge, to perpetuate the living culture of these Islands.

“100 years ago, visionary thinking created the State’s forest reserve system to ensure that there would always be adequate fresh water resources. Today, we are taking similar protective measures for our marine resources,” said Peter Young, Board of Land and Natural Resources Chairman.

“Our commitment extends beyond State waters. We support the Sanctuary process and in that we support an organized phase-out of commercial fishing in federal waters. We believe this will make the largest protected area in the world,” Young said.

“As one of the last great wilderness locations on earth in an area worthy of international significance, it is only right to consider the long-term preservation of this area and strive to have one place on earth that is free from extraction,” stated Peter Young.

Governor Lingle also announced that the State is proactively pursuing the designation of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands as a World Heritage Site. Less than 150 sites on the planet have been granted this internationally significant designation by the United Nations.

The move to set aside all State waters out to three miles around all the islands and atolls of the NWHI, except Midway, builds on the DLNR’s longstanding policy of managing ground and surface waters and nearshore marine resources as a public trust, and ensures that Hawai‘i has abundant reef resources for the future.

The rules demonstrate DLNR’s responsiveness to conservation measures requested by considerable public comment. Two rounds of public hearings held statewide over the last three and a half years resulted in over 25,000 public comments received.

“The public input on these proposed rules has been overwhelming,” Young said. “We heard loud and clear from the public that they feel that the NWHI is a special place worthy of the highest levels of protection.”

Governor Lingle stressed that the NWHI region is a “Hawaii’s gift to not only our residents, but to the global community as world-class resources.”

At a time when many of the world’s oceans are being degraded, the DLNR action to set aside state waters in the NWHI as a marine refuge demonstrates proactive stewardship at its best.

While the reefs of the NWHI are among the healthiest in the world, they are not immune from present and future threats.

The marine refuge further protects the majority of coral reef habitats in the NWHI, most of which are under State jurisdiction.

They also enhance protection of critically endangered Hawaiian monk seal habitat, helping to ensure the seal’s survival, and nurture recovery of other endangered and threatened species that populate NWHI waters.

The Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge has long protected the coral reefs surrounding most of the islands and atolls in the NWHI to the depth of 10 fathoms (20 fathoms around Necker Island).

“We look forward to working with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and the National Marine Sanctuary Program to create a seamless management regime for the NWHI,” Young said.

“To that aim, we continue to work towards the creation of a national marine sanctuary and look forward to the potential of co-managing this special place with our federal partners.”

Young noted that the State presently enjoys a similar successful partnership with the Hawaiian Islands Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary.

Other states have also formed mutually beneficial relationships with national marine sanctuaries, which help to provide resources necessary for adequate protection — a critical factor in a region as remote as the NWHI.

The NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve is the largest conservation area — marine or terrestrial — ever established in the U.S.

The Executive Order that established the Reserve called for federal and state agencies managing natural and cultural resources in the NWHI to coordinate their efforts for greater effectiveness.

The State's new rules formally reinforce a cooperative management regime in the NWHI.

State and federal resource managers presently collaborate closely on a wide range of resource management issues, such as research, education, permitting and enforcement, to implement comprehensive long-term resource protection and to reduce potential impacts from human activities in this fragile area.

The National Ocean and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) has initiated a process to designate the NWHI Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve as the 14th national marine sanctuary under the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.