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News

ENVIRONMENT



Jonathan Blair / Corbis file

The Pearl and Hermes Atoll is one of the northwest Hawaiian islands that became the largest U.S. protected area ever.

Hawaiian reefs become largest U.S. reserve ever

**Clinton executive order curbs
fishing, bans drilling**

MSNBC STAFF AND WIRE REPORTS

WASHINGTON, Dec. 4 — Noting that 90 percent of the coral reefs in the central Indian Ocean have died and that reefs elsewhere are threatened by pollution, fishing and other human activities, President Bill Clinton on Monday established the largest protected area in the United States — an 84-million-acre ecosystem reserve around the northwestern Hawaiian Islands and their vast reef system.

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The area contains nearly 70 percent of the United States' coral reefs.

“THESE REMARKABLE living structures, built cell by cell over millions of years, are at once irreplaceable and valuable,” Clinton said. “Coral reefs are beautiful, but more than that, they are home to thousands of species of fish and wildlife found nowhere else on earth.”

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Clinton issued an executive order creating the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, capping fishing there at present levels, and banning any mineral development. In the most critical areas, fishing would be banned entirely.

The reserve contains nearly 70 percent of the United States' coral reefs, as well as pristine remote islands, atolls, submerged lagoons and the only home for the endangered Hawaiian monk seal. The archipelago covers an area larger than Florida and Georgia.

Some commercial fisherman said the reserve would be too restrictive, while some conservationists thought Clinton should have gone further. The Center for Marine Conservation, for one, had urged Clinton to declare the area a national monument, providing stricter and permanent safeguards.

The president said his actions were designed to preserve the islands' natural beauty “for a long time. I hope, forever.”

He said President Theodore Roosevelt “recognized the same imperative” almost a century ago when he established the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

“He knew then that our natural wonders on land and sea



- [San Diego's KNSD-TV reports on reef problems at home and worldwide](#)

form an integral part of who we are as a people, and that every generation of Americans must do its part to sustain and strengthen this legacy,”

Clinton said. “Today we do just that, incorporating the refuge he created into a new, vast and wonderful Yellowstone of the sea.”

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Clinton announced his action during a speech at the National Geographic Society. He urged his audience to continue the steps he has taken to preserve the environment,

“no matter who becomes president, no matter the partisan divide of the Congress.”

The Associated Press contributed to this report.

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