



CTA-051-Ocean Protection-French Polynesia

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Vic Ferguson

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A Tiny Island Territory Has An Ambitious Plan For Ocean Protection

BY KATIE VALENTINE  APR 7, 2016 8:00 AM
Rapa, French Polynesia.

A small chain of islands in the South Pacific has a big plan.



The Austral Islands submitted a proposal to the French Polynesian government this week to create a 1 million square kilometer (about 386,100 square mile) marine reserve in the waters surrounding the islands. The reserve, which would be named Rāhui Nui Nō Tuhaa Pae (“the big rāhui of the Austral Islands”), would ban fishing 20 nautical miles out from the islands, creating buffers around the islands where locals can fish for subsistence. This ensures that island residents can still fish for a living, but that fish that live in the deep sea are protected.

If granted approval by French Polynesia, the reserve would be the largest no-take marine reserve in the world, surpassing the U.K.'s Pitcairn Islands.



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Zonage proposé pour la grande réserve marine des Australes – Rāhui Nui Nō Tuha'a Pae



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According to the Pew Charitable Trusts, which worked with the Austral Islands to draft the proposal, the region is home to “one of the healthiest marine ecosystems on the planet.” The waters around one of the islands — Rapa — is home to 383 species of fish, 112 coral species, and 150 algae species. More than 60 species of pelagic fish — those that live in the open ocean — live in the waters farther out from the islands. Ten species of marine mammals, 14 species of sharks, and four species of rays also make their home in the waters surrounding the islands, and the islands themselves are rich in marine bird life.

Part of what makes the ecosystem around the islands so healthy is a local effort to preserve marine life that existed even before the idea for the reserve came into being. Jérôme Petit, director of Pew’s Global Ocean Legacy campaign in French Polynesia, told ThinkProgress that the concept of “Rāhui” — meaning conservation, or restricting access to certain areas — is still “anchored in the mentality of the people,” he said. Well before Pew arrived in the region to help draft the proposal around two years ago, there was a “clear culture of protection” among the people, he said.



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“People really rely on nature for their livelihoods,” he said. “Everyone is a fisherman — there are no cattle on the island. The protein source is really fish.”

The islanders “know that if there is no fish, there is no livelihood anymore. So they really want to protect their waters.”

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They also know that, while the ecosystems around their islands are generally healthy, overfishing is a huge problem around the world — and the overfishing of major open-ocean stocks like tuna impacts their livelihoods too. The island residents, which total about 6,800, are strongly supportive of the plan to protect the waters around the islands, Petit said.

“In the 1980s, we witnessed overfishing along our coastlines as modern fishing techniques and

freezers arrived to our island,” Tuanainai Narii, the mayor of Rapa, said in a statement. “We brought our fish stocks back to healthy levels by reinstating a coastal rāhui. Now we see what is happening in the larger Pacific and recognize that more must be done to conserve pelagic fish stocks, which is why we are calling for this marine reserve as a big rāhui on the open ocean.”

Petit thinks the French Polynesian government will accept the proposal, but as of now, there’s no way to say when officials will make a decision on the plan.

Protecting marine life from overfishing is key to keeping marine ecosystems resilient to other stressors, including climate change and ocean acidification. Multiple studies have found that protecting the grazer species of a coral reef — parrotfish and urchins — can help coral reefs become far more resilient to ocean acidification and warming, the latter of which can cause coral bleaching. The United Nations has a target of 10 percent of the world’s oceans being protected in some way by 2020, though a recent study found that, in order to best support fisheries and ocean wildlife, 30 percent should be protected.



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Coral reef off the coast of Rapa.

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So far, about 6 percent of the world's oceans have been designated as Marine Protected Areas — a designation with a definition that varies from country to country, making some MPAs more effective than others. A 2014 study [found](#) that 59 percent of MPAs examined by researchers were “not ecologically distinguishable from fished sites,” with some of them even allowing seabed mining and most allowing some fishing. And many marine sanctuaries also suffer from problems with enforcement — fishing in these areas may be limited or banned by law, but many countries, especially small island nations, don't have the resources to ensure that all fishing vessels are complying with the laws.

One project is trying to help governments and nonprofits keep an eye on illegal fishing activity in protected regions. [Global Fishing Watch](#), which is being developed by Google, Skytruth, and Oceana, uses satellite data to track fishing vessels around the world, to see where they're fishing and whether they're adhering to local laws. Groups plan to launch the project later this year.



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“Governments can use it to keep eye on what’s going on, and NGOs can use it to keep an eye on whether anyone is doing anything about it,” said Paul Woods, chief technology officer for Skytruth.

This type of monitoring device will be hugely useful for fisheries management, but it won’t solve all the problems facing marine reserve enforcement. Some countries simply don’t have the manpower to capture fishing boats that are in their waters illegally, even if they know they’re there. Palau, for instance, created a huge marine sanctuary in the western Pacific last year. But Palau’s government has struggled to stay on top of a region twice the size of Mexico, ensuring that fishing laws are upheld — though the country has been working with Pew and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography to develop a five-year plan for improving enforcement of the sanctuary.

But Global Fishing Watch can, at least, “put pressure on governments and corporate actors to follow rules, and provide tools for governments and enforcement bodies to make it easier for them to get a clear picture for what’s going on.” And other satellite projects, including Project Eyes on the Seas, are also helping countries detect illegal fishing in reserves.

And in the Austral Islands, at least, enforcement shouldn’t be a problem. The French military is responsible for French Polynesia’s open ocean, and they have a “very efficient strategy” for ensuring laws are upheld there, Petit said, and a marine reserve wouldn’t add additional costs to their efforts.

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The only thing necessary for the triumph of evil is that good men do nothing”Edmund Burke