



# Center for the Blue Economy

*at the Monterey Institute of International Studies*

## Public Statement on President Obama's Proposed Expansion of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument

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President Obama's recent announcement to vastly expand the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument was received very favorably by the conservation community, but was met with a fair share of skepticism from those who view this as yet more government restrictions on economic activity. What these naysayers fail to grasp is that Obama's proposed doubling of the world's oceans under protection (which currently stands at a measly 1%) is actually a sound investment that will pay large economic dividends over the coming years. With ocean acidification on the rise and the seas warming, the world desperately needs large marine refuges to safeguard the most biologically productive areas of the ocean that provide much of the planet's biodiversity. If one was looking for an area abundant with some of the world's most valuable marine assets, one could hardly do better. These chains of islands include endemic trees, grasses, and birds, plus rare sea turtles, whales, and monk seals, as well as high-quality coral reefs. They are also home to plants and animals most of us have never heard of, but which may be key to our survival. By designating these areas of largely pristine ocean for protection, the President will help to create a more resilient marine environment that can continue to provide the oxygen we breathe, abundant seafood, wildlife for tourism and recreation, and carbon sequestration for generations to come. This move sets a fine example for other countries in the world to set aside protected areas within their jurisdictional waters, hence creating a much larger cumulative impact.

Scientific evidence indicates that greater biodiversity gives our oceans a better chance to adjust to the rapidly falling ocean pH resulting from the absorption of excess CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the atmosphere, allowing marine life a greater chance for survival. Even more important, it is estimated that marine algae in the form of plankton and phytoplankton produce between 70 and 80 percent of all oxygen in the atmosphere. Our very survival on the planet relies on these oxygen generators, which means that they are truly priceless. In addition, the ocean's capacity to absorb much of the atmosphere's greenhouse gases, which moderate the earth's warming, is compromised by the loss of biodiversity. By preserving this large area of the world's oceans, we also help the ocean's carbon dioxide absorptive capacity. These same oxygen generators are the base of the food chain in the oceans; without them our seafood supply is at risk, as are all other marine creatures.

These marine protected areas also are regenerators for our depleted global fisheries. Once again, scientific evidence demonstrates that setting aside pristine areas to generate and preserve marine life creates greater abundance of sea life and essentially builds the stocks for areas beyond the protected areas, where the fisheries are currently in trouble. Fishermen will ultimately benefit from these conservation areas. For example, even though the proposed extension of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument only accounts for 3-5% of the world's current tuna catch, the species is near extinction and providing even this new small window of protection could prove critical for their survival; and this is a multi-billion industry. It is also likely that the new Marine National Monument will become a major hub for new oceanographic and biological research, generating tens of millions in research expeditions and studies. While it is so remote as to make tourism difficult, there is also tremendous potential there for high-end excursions to a part of the world that few will ever see. This could also generate millions in new revenue if done correctly.

Fears about the negative economic impacts on fishing and other extractive industries are based on faulty and short-sighted economics that ignore the huge benefits that come with conservation and regeneration. The economic case for marine conservation is strong and Obama's proposed expansion will easily pass any cost-benefit test in the decades to come. It is the role of government to take the long-term into account, not just short-term profit, and this executive action does just that.

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*The Center for the Blue Economy, at the Monterey Institute of International Studies, promotes ocean and coastal sustainability by providing economic data and analysis to policymakers, businesses, NGOs, and concerned citizens.*

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