

Proposed monument for Isles brings discord

10-31-00 BZ THA
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ADVERTISER SCIENCE WRITER

Native Hawaiians, fishermen, environmental groups and government agencies are wrangling over a quiet federal initiative to designate the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands a national monument.

The move, which Washington sources said could be announced by President Clinton as early as during his Veterans Day visit to the Islands next week, could ban fishing and the gathering of precious corals throughout the 1,100-mile-long stretch of islands, atolls and reefs.

Members of the Hawaiian environmental alliance, Kahea, flew to Washington, D.C., yesterday afternoon to lobby for the establishment of the monument.

"This is the last safe place for seals and turtles," said Kahea member Louis "Buzzy" Agard. "Because regeneration is extremely slow there, the delicate balance of the thousands of diverse species cannot tolerate the pressures of commercial activities ... If commercial extraction is allowed, populations will be wiped out and never return."

Kahea supports a national monument to be surrounded by a national marine sanctuary.

Gov. Ben Cayetano has written the president to oppose the national monument, arguing that the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands are an integral part of the state whose uses for fishing, ecotourism and even the refueling of trans-Pacific aircraft should be protected.

If a monument is established so soon, it will have been done without collecting the views of Hawai'i's people and without fully reviewing the issues, said Kitty Simonds, director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council.

"This thing bypasses the public process and all the congressional acts, including the National Environmental Policy Act," Simonds said.

U.S. Rep. Neil Abercrombie said the public must be involved if a new management scheme is to work.

"My experience with the Humpback Whale National Marine Sanctuary demonstrated that the public must be involved in final management plans if it is going to accept those plans," Abercrombie said.

Fishing in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is governed by separate fishery council master plans for lobster fishing, precious coral collecting, bottom fishing and pelagic (open ocean) fishing. The council is now preparing a fifth master plan for the protection of coral reefs.

Simonds said she understands that the impetus for establishing a national monument came out of the U.S. Coral Reef Task Force, but she said the primary threats to coral reefs of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands will not be addressed by establishment of a monument.

"The danger to coral reefs is not overfishing but storms and marine debris," she said. "It's not people. Those islands are 500 miles away."

Kahea member Isaac Harp, of Maui, said the fisheries council and existing regulatory mechanisms do not provide sufficient protection to the islands.

"The remote islands remain vulnerable to exploitation," Harp said.

National monuments can be established by the president without the approval of Congress, under the Antiquities Act of 1906. No president has created as many monuments as Clinton.