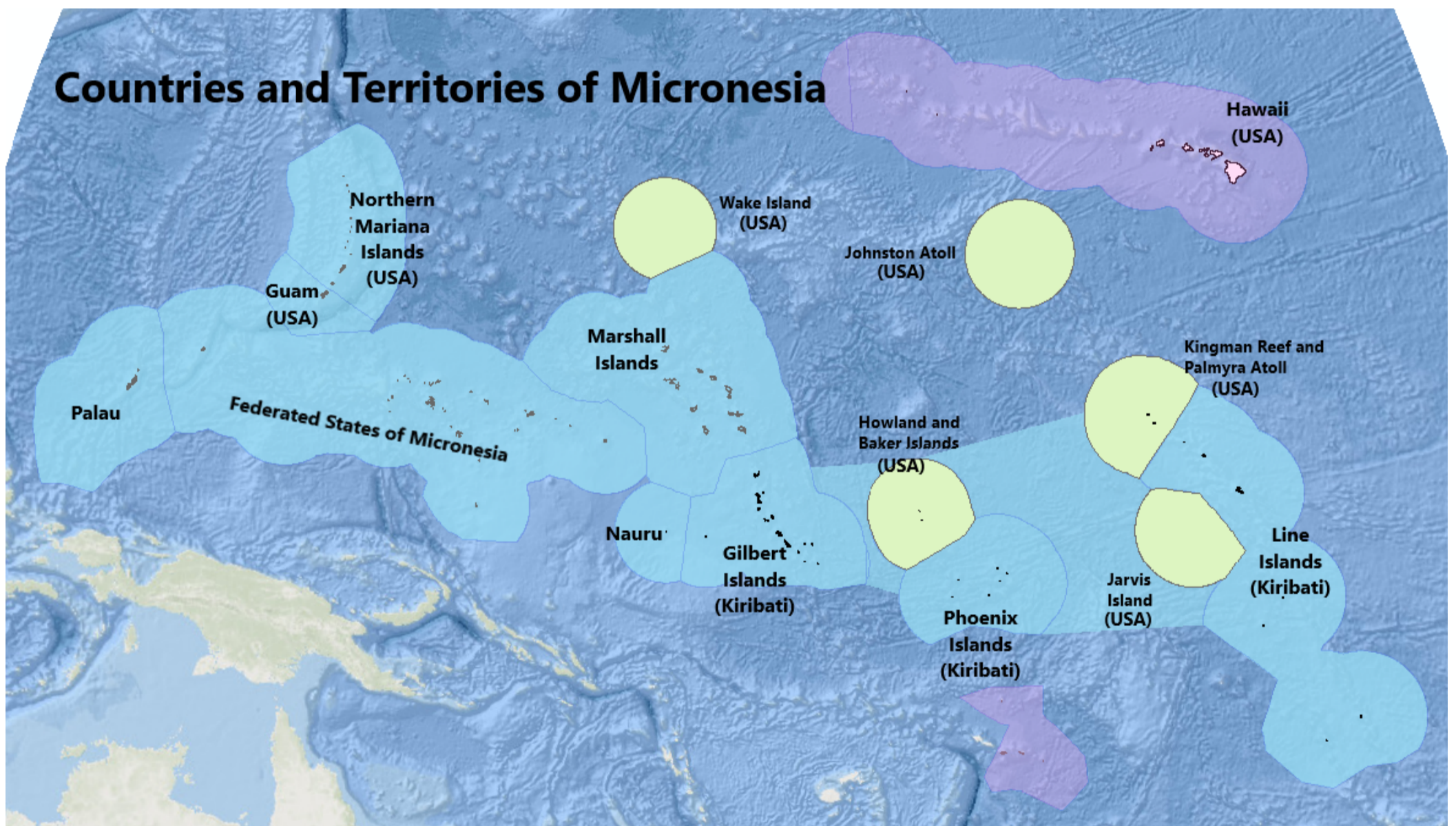


What True Conservation Of The Pacific Remote Islands Involves

Working with Indigenous peoples from Guam, Saipan, Samoa and Hawaii is the only way to create something lasting and meaningful.

By [Angelo Villagomez](#), [Steven Manaoakamai Johnson](#)

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The United States has set a goal of conserving 30% of its lands and waters by 2030.

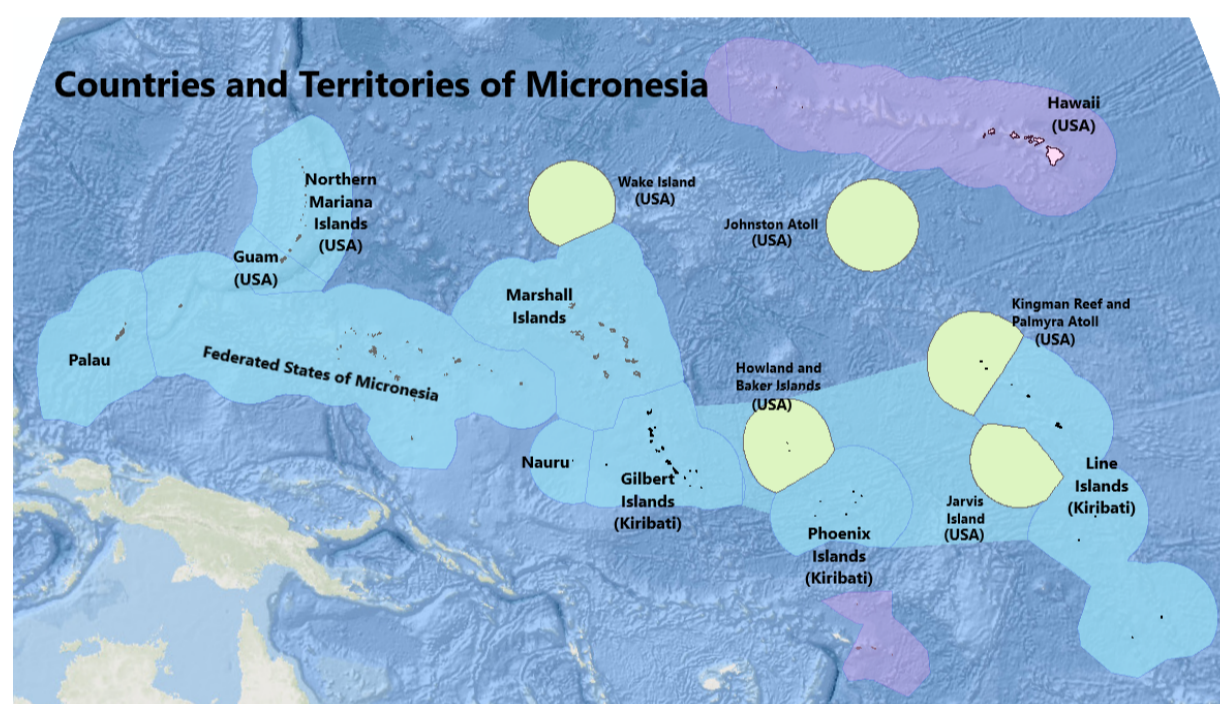


But the true path to conservation success is neither simple nor straightforward, and **it cannot be quantified** by a single number. Success is a path we must walk together, especially alongside those who know the land and sea best — the Indigenous.

Behind this column are two authors, one Chamorro and the other Kanaka Maoli. We call on our people to come together, to talk under the shade of a breadfruit tree about what matters in conservation. It's time for honest conversation.

As a starting point for dialogue, we offer this: The proposed sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Islands is flawed. The narrative of empty, untouched lands and ocean is a lie. It's a continuation of Manifest Destiny and [aqua nullius](#); even the Catholic Church has turned its back on such ideas.

The Native Hawaiian community has largely celebrated the proposed sanctuary, but it ignores the rights of other Indigenous peoples — those from Micronesia and Samoa with strong historical and cultural ties to these islands. Our relatives from these islands exist at the margins of society, vestiges of the American Empire with limited-to-no political agency. It is unfair and unjust to hoist the cost of conservation upon them, while the social and political benefits accrue to Hawaii.



The region of Micronesia stretches from Palau in the west to the Line Islands of Kiribati in the east (highlighted in blue). Six of the seven islands within the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument (Wake, Howland, Baker, Jarvis, Kingman and Palmyra) lie within Micronesia. Johnston lies between Micronesia and Hawaii. (Angelo Villagomez)

In a peer-reviewed paper [published last week](#), we offer a better way forward for the proposed sanctuary. It's a path that acknowledges past wrongs with the intent to heal. On the surface, it is about decolonizing conservation.

Between those lines, and much like the layered meanings of our cultural traditions in Saipan and Hawaii, our paper is about decolonizing ourselves. The stories we share may be unsettling, but they speak truth. We hope you'll listen.

Colonialism is masterful at pitting us against each other. Our shared history and present-day realities are shaped by this, and our collective reflections must hinge on respect for the trauma resulting from that experience. We must advocate for all voices, not just the loudest.

Without sincere dialogue, this proposed sanctuary could break promises made to Native peoples by leaders in Washington, D.C. It will surely damage conservation in the long run.

The Pacific Remote Islands came under American control through nearly two centuries of colonialism — from the Guano Islands Act of 1856, to World War II, to today. But make no mistake: These are Micronesian islands. Leaders in the Pacific territories opposed the sanctuary because the plan was made without them.



The authors argue that the proposed sanctuary in the Pacific Remote Islands is flawed. Pictured are canoe carvers on Saipan. (Angelo Villagomez)

The colonial vision of ocean conservation has been hyperfocused on biodiversity and quantifiable metrics like the amount of area conserved. Ocean conservation by and for Pacific Islanders is about more than fish and turtles. It's about the people involved, the processes utilized to get there — in other words, the who and how. We've seen too much “parachute science” in the Pacific. We need to change that.

Hawaii and Micronesia share a history of colonization. In our paper, we quote Haunani-Kay Trask: Colonialism's damage is our shared legacy. We call on those in Hawaii to use their influence to support Micronesian and Samoan leadership in ocean conservation.

To date, the push for the sanctuary has been one-sided. This is difficult to hear, but it's been about celebrating colonization, not connecting cultures. If supporting Hawaiian heritage means denying Micronesian rights, then we've lost our way.



Grey reef sharks and colorful schools of anthias in the waters of Jarvis Island, Pacific Remote Island Areas Marine National Monument. (Kelvin Gorospe/NOAA)

Our paper offers up several recommendations for improving the long-term conservation of the region, but our vision ultimately boils down to three values:

- Talking to each other, because real conversation is the first step.
- Respecting rights, because the rights of Indigenous people are non-negotiable.
- Including Indigenous voices, because decisions should be made together, with everyone at the table.

Ultimately, true conservation of the Pacific Remote Islands means working with Indigenous peoples from Guam (Guåhan), Saipan, Samoa, Hawaii and all points in between, respecting our knowledge and rights. That's the only way to create something lasting and meaningful.

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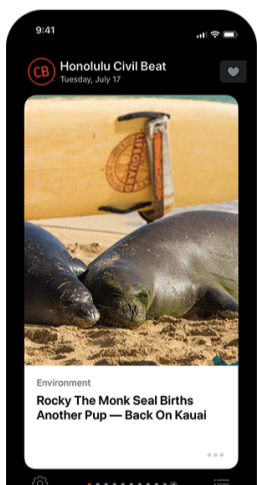
Angelo Villagomez is a Micronesian ocean advocate who uses Indigenous knowledge and values with scientific methods to address modern threats to the ocean, including habitat loss, harmful fishing, and climate colonialism. Villagomez is a senior fellow at Center for American Progress in Washington, D.C.



Steven Manaoakamai Johnson



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