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ARTICLE NOV 28, 2022

US Pacific Territories and the America the Beautiful Initiative Can Deliver Ocean Climate Solutions

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Tackling Climate Change and Environmental Injustice, Asia-Pacific, Biden Administration, +3 More



The U.S. Pacific territories are vast—combined, their ocean areas are nearly twice the size of Alaska—and they are home to some of the world’s largest marine protected areas. This region will be critical for achieving the Biden administration’s goals to combat climate change, protect 30 percent of lands and waters by 2030, and ensure access to nature for all Americans.



A shallow coral head appears in front of Fatu Rock off the coast of Tutuila Island, American Samoa, November 2012. (Getty/Universal Images Group/VW PICS/Andre Seale)

The Biden administration has issued an ambitious call to action through its “America the Beautiful” initiative to conserve, connect, and restore 30 percent of U.S. lands and waters by 2030. In terms of the ocean, this means delivering conservation within the United States’ exclusive economic zone (EEZ)—the ocean area that extends 200 miles beyond American coastlines. In particular, the U.S. territories in the Pacific have some of the largest EEZs in the country, making this region critical for delivering conservation and climate goals on the ocean.

Although the total area of the ocean controlled by the United States is vast, comprising more than 11.4 million square kilometers, only 21 percent of this ocean surrounds the contiguous United States. The majority of American waters lie around Alaska, Hawaii, and overseas territories. In fact, the combined ocean surrounding the U.S. Pacific territories alone is 3.3 million square kilometers—nearly twice the land area of Alaska—accounting for 29 percent of the total EEZ of the entire United States.

Figure 1



The U.S. Pacific territories offer expansive potential for meeting 30x30 goals

The ocean area surrounding the U.S. Pacific territories is nearly twice the size of Alaska’s land mass



Source: [Sea Around Us, "Home," available at searoundus.org \(last accessed November 2022\).](https://searoundus.org/)

Hover or click to see values.

Chart: Center for American Progress

Notes: An exclusive economic zone (EEZ) is an ocean zone where the United States or other coastal nations have jurisdiction over natural resources. It extends no more than 200 nautical miles from shore and is adjacent to the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea of the United States.

What are EEZs, marine reserves, and well-enforced protected areas? ▼

Exclusive economic zone (EEZ): An “exclusive economic zone” is an ocean zone where the United States or other coastal nations have jurisdiction over natural resources. It extends no more than 200 nautical miles from shore and is adjacent to the 12-nautical-mile territorial sea of the United States. The U.S. EEZ is 11,351,000 square kilometers and the second largest in the world, only after France.

Marine reserve: A marine reserve is the strongest type of protected area, generally restricting all damaging human activities—in particular, fishing. When they are well-enforced, marine reserves result in more fish, bigger fish, and greater biodiversity and build resilience against the impacts of climate change.

Well-enforced protected area: Protected areas only result in benefits to nature and people when they are implemented and well-enforced. This begins to occur when a management plan is enacted with planned activities to mitigate threats and achieve conservation goals, such as the hiring of staff or the monitoring of resources.

Where are the United States' overseas territories?

The United States has possession of several overseas territories in the western and central Pacific, a constellation of American islands—including Guam and Saipan, Wake Island, and Palmyra Atoll—that straddle the International Date Line and stretch across four time zones. Many of the islands are home to Indigenous peoples with unique histories and cultures going back thousands of years. These Indigenous groups include, but are not limited to, American Samoans, Chamorros, Refaluwasch, and several other Micronesian groups, all with deep cultural ties to the ocean and proud fishing traditions.



Pacific Islanders in the U.S. territories proudly carry the burden of ocean conservation but need capacity and funding support from the federal government to make those protections durable for generations to come.

The region is also home to the Mariana Trench—six times longer than the Grand Canyon and deeper than Mount Everest is high. This area remains one of the most unexplored habitats in the world, and its offshore waters contain an array of different ecosystems, including underwater volcanoes, abyssal plains, and hydrothermal vents.

These tropical ocean waters have some of the highest levels of biodiversity in the United States: The islands are surrounded by migrating whales and turtles, coral reefs, and hundreds of species of fish, some of which are found nowhere else on the planet. Yet many of these species and habitats are sensitive to the extreme threats wrought by climate change, from rising seas washing away their shores to warmer, more acidic waters becoming inhospitable for the marine species that people depend on to feed their families and practice their culture.

While these islands are small, their surrounding ocean areas are vast and have been protected as areas of national significance through monument and sanctuary designations. In particular, the Mariana Trench Marine National Monument, Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument, and National Marine Sanctuary of American Samoa are three of the largest ocean sanctuaries on the planet, with the highest levels of protection that can be afforded to American waters. When combined with the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in Hawaii, the U.S. Pacific Islands make up 99.5 percent of the country's marine reserves—the strongest type of protected area that can be designated in the ocean.

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The science of ocean protection

Successful marine protected areas share all or most of the following five key features: They are 1) marine reserves, 2) well-enforced, 3) established for 10 years or more, 4) large in size, and 5) isolated by deep water and sand. The Pacific monuments meet most of these criteria, and when their size is considered, their contributions to both the America the Beautiful initiative and the global effort to protect 30 percent of the ocean by 2030 cannot be underestimated.

Size and level of protection do not tell the complete story, however. Protected areas that lack staffing and funding have been shown to do a poor job of protecting nature; the same can be said of areas that have not been designed or managed with local input. The ability to engage with local Indigenous communities and territorial governments and to manage these protected areas is hindered by time zones, capacity, and distance, as most management decisions are made by federal staff based in Hawaii, not the territories themselves.

To put this distance in context, Guam and Saipan are as far west of Hawaii as New Orleans and Minneapolis are east. This situation is most obvious with the Mariana Trench Monument: While it is more than 20 times larger than

Yellowstone National Park, there is only one staffer on Saipan, the capital of the Northern Mariana Islands. Designated in 2009, the Mariana Trench and Pacific Remote Islands marine national monuments still lack final management plans. The community's response to the lack of engagement, hiring, and programs offered by the federal government has ranged from disappointment to outright hostility, which has made it even more difficult to advocate for ongoing and additional federal conservation initiatives.

99.5%
of U.S. marine reserves are located in the Pacific Islands

Policy recommendations

The U.S. Pacific territories can help the country reach its conservation goals, but only if this work is done with Indigenous peoples and knowledge leading the way. Specifically,

the Biden administration must continue to strengthen its relationship with these territories in the following ways:

- **Prioritize the U.S. Pacific territories with jobs, programs, and funding:** The Biden administration's America the Beautiful initiative should prioritize ocean conservation for these territories, as they are home to the largest, most strongly protected marine areas with the highest levels of biodiversity in the United States. The first step toward actively managing the national marine monuments in these territories—which were designated in 2009 by the Bush administration—is to develop and publish final management plans so they can be implemented. As noted earlier, 99.5 percent of marine reserves in the United States are in the Pacific Islands, but with the exception of Hawaii, they do not receive federal funding that is proportional to the conservation burden that they carry. In the long run, this lack of funding will harm the United States' ability to protect ocean resources because capacity and funding are failing to reach front-line ocean conservation communities.
- **Move management decision-making power out of Hawaii and back to the territories:** In particular, efforts should be made to engage the Indigenous American Samoan, Chamorro, and other Micronesian peoples and territorial governments who are long-time stewards and owners of these resources. The United States should also explore further opportunities for the territories to co-manage the protected areas in their own waters. This would increase access for several Indigenous peoples to engage in natural resources management and is in line with the Biden administration's [Justice40 Initiative](#).
- **Engage with territorial governments to determine the unique needs their citizens have when it comes to ocean conservation:** The Biden administration recently announced a federal policy establishing a [consultation policy](#) with Native Hawaiians. This should be further extended to all Indigenous peoples in the Pacific territories. In addition, the federal government uses other models to engage with Native peoples in Alaska and the contiguous United States, and those should be explored to determine the most appropriate way to engage with Indigenous Pacific Islanders.

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Conclusion

Pacific Islanders in the U.S. territories proudly carry the burden of ocean conservation but need capacity and funding support from the federal government to make those protections durable for generations to come. It is not enough to designate protected areas; these areas must be followed up with robust management plans, staffing, and funding. The Biden administration has the opportunity to designate, implement, and improve the management of the national marine monuments and sanctuaries in the

Pacific territories and count those toward the goals of the America the Beautiful initiative. But to succeed, this process must engage Indigenous peoples and coastal communities.

The authors would like to thank Steve Bonitatibus for his contributions to this column.

Authors' note: Angelo Villagomez, a CAP senior fellow and co-author of this column, is Indigenous Chamorro from the Northern Mariana Islands.

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