

# DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

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## SOOTY TERN AND SEA TURTLE REFUGE ESTABLISHED IN SAMOAN ISLANDS

One of the world's smallest atolls, 18-acre Rose Atoll in American Samoa, has been set aside as a National Wildlife Refuge to preserve an area little disturbed by man for sea turtles, more than a dozen sea bird species, and for scientific study, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service Director Lynn A. Greenwalt announced today.

The atoll, unique because of its square shape, is located 150 miles east and southeast of Pago Pago, almost 900 miles south of the equator, and 2,000 miles south of Hawaii. It is in the vicinity of the Apollo 10 splashdown in May 1969 and is the most remote National Wildlife Refuge ever established.

Greenwalt complimented the Samoan people. "Their interest in preserving the atoll sparked the drive to set it aside as a refuge which culminated in its establishment."

The balance of life on the atoll provides a unique scientific opportunity for the Fish and Wildlife Service to collect basic ecological data on atolls.

The dynamics of atoll life are clear on the small island. The atoll is a square reef of pink coral with a 100-foot wide boat passage linking a 6 to 50 foot deep and 2,000 yards wide lagoon to the sea. Two stands of 80 foot buka trees provide top nests for red-footed boobies and frigate birds, while fairy and Hawaiian noddy terns use the middle and lower branches. Two small clumps of about 40 coconut trees about 40 feet high and small 10 foot shrub trees dot the rest of the island.

Sixteen species of birds were noted with the most numerous being 16,000 sooty tern chicks and an equal number of adults. Blue-footed boobies, plovers, curlews, tattlers, herons, terns, and tropicbirds abound with populations swelling at night when the sea birds return to feed their young.

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Fish and Wildlife Service biologists were surprised at the complete absence of any evidence of the presence of burrowing birds such as petrels and shearwaters, and speculate that, perhaps, Polynesian rats which are numerous, and are the only mammals on the island, drove them away. Moreover, beach nesting bird chicks and rats seemed to ignore each other during the day. Biologists suspect that the rats prefer to eat hatchling sea turtles which are numerous. The mammal-bird balance may also be modulated by frigate preying on the rats. These population dynamics are but one aspect of the atoll for future study.

The island is an important nesting area for the green sea turtle, a rare reptile, and possible the hawksbill turtle, an endangered species in that part of the Pacific. Fish and mollusk studies in the lagoon and nearby waters have been only cursory to date.

The Samoan government will enforce the Federal laws governing the Rose Atoll National Wildlife Refuge and the island will be administered under the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge office. Public use will be restricted to scientists and educators on a permit basis with emphasis on providing Samoan students of biology an area for study.

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