

Marine National Monuments: Singular Achievements

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It's mind boggling to think about the range of habitats and wildlife that the Refuge System protects – and how they are spread nearly around the globe. Maybe nothing illustrates that better than the Refuge System's tropical islands – from 22 places in the Pacific Ocean to nine islands in the Caribbean Sea to four marine national monuments. The four marine national monuments -- all in the Pacific Ocean -- are: Marianas Trench, Pacific Remote Islands, Papahānaumokuākea and Rose Atoll.

Perhaps you think that the marine national monuments are so distant from the continental U.S. that their significance is limited. After all, the marine national monuments are dots in the vast Pacific Ocean. Wrong! In fact, they are some of the most important, intact, functioning marine ecosystems on Earth. The marine monuments are essential for the conservation of critical species as we work to conserve a natural world for future generations.

President Obama expanded the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument in September 2014. That monument alone protects nearly 490,000 miles around the islands and atolls that are also protected as national wildlife refuges. That monument is one of the last havens for wildlife in the world -- home to one of the largest and most pristine collections of coral reef, seabird and shorebird protected areas on the planet. Millions of seabirds forage in the monument's waters and raise their young on the islands and atolls.

Renowned oceanographer Sylvia Earle, named by Time magazine in 1998 as its first Hero for the Planet, has called the ocean the “blue heart of the planet.” She has called the marine monuments “hope spots” – places that not only feed the world, but are also critical to the life and health of the Pacific Ocean.

And they are places that inspire us. The mystery of the Marianas Trench – the deepest part of the world's oceans, where darkness is punctuated by bioluminescent organisms -- is a wonder and no less iconic than the Grand Canyon or Mount Everest.

The Pacific Ocean may be our last great frontier, a place less understood than the moon. Because we have protected these marine national monuments, our chance to expand the world's knowledge and to improve the quality of life is still intact. That's always the benefit of conservation.

Caption:

Soldierfish photographed at Baker Island National Wildlife Refuge, part of the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. (Jim Maragos-USFWS)