

WORLD

MARINE RESERVES

Kiribati isn't a sustainable role model

By Christopher Pala

TARAWA, Kiribati — For the past five years, two prominent U.S. conservation organizations and the president of this Pacific island nation have claimed to have pulled off one of the biggest achievements in conservation — the creation of one of the world's largest marine reserves that ban all fishing.

The 158,500-square-mile reserve, known as the Phoenix Islands Protected Area, would be a major accomplishment in preventing the world's last major population of skipjack tuna from becoming as depleted as those of the Atlantic and Indian oceans, fisheries scientists say.

But only 3 percent of the sanctuary, which is about the size of California, has been closed to commercial fishing since

its creation in 2008 around eight uninhabited islands that belong to Kiribati (pronounced Keer-ree-bahss), according to the reserve's management plan.

"While the world has hailed Kiribati for its conservation efforts, it seems the reserve has only served to bankroll Spanish tuna fleets fishing in its waters," said Seni Nabou, Pacific political adviser for Greenpeace's ocean preservation branch.

97 percent fishing

Fishing has increased to unsustainable levels in the reserve as tuna prices have soared, scientists say. According to a report commissioned by eight Pacific nations — Kiribati and Micronesia, Marshall Islands, Nauru, Palau, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands and Tuvalu — some 50,000



Justin McManus / The AGE

In 2012, revenue from fishing licenses accounted for half of Kiribati's national budget of \$120 million. The 33 atolls in the Pacific that make up the impoverished country have few natural resources.

tons of tuna were taken out of the reserve in 2012.

In an interview last month at his office in Tarawa, Kiribati's capital, President Anote Tong acknowledged that commercial fishing is still taking place in 97 percent of the refuge because no agreement has been reached with Conservation International, one of the largest U.S. environmental groups, on payment for lost fishing revenues.

"We are still deciding on the compensation," Tong said.

Yet the 61-year-old Tong, who has garnered international attention for claiming his low-lying island nation's 103,248 inhabitants will become environmental refugees by 2050 as a result of sea-level rising from climate change, continues to describe the reserve as a "fully protected marine park" that is "off-limits to fishing," and his nation's "great gift to the world."

On its website, Bos-

Kiribati

Location: The capital, Tarawa, is about halfway between Hawaii and Australia in the Central Pacific Ocean.

Population: 103,248. Nearly 99 percent are Micronesian.

Land mass: 33 coral atolls that reach no more than 6 feet above sea level.

Languages: I-Kiribati, English (the official language)

Government: Parliamentary system

Year of independence: 1979; a former British colony

Sources: CIA World Factbook, Wikipedia



John Blanchard / The Chronicle

Trivia: One of the Phoenix Islands — Nikumaroro, also called Gardner Island — is the possible location where famed aviator Amelia Earhart crash-landed during her ill-fated final flight in 1937.

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ton's New England Aquarium, which helps administer the reserve, also declares that the remote archipelago is "now safe from the threats of commercial fishing." Until last month, Conservation International's website made the same claim.

Money needed for goal

Current plans, developed with the assistance of Conservation International, a nonprofit group in Arlington, Va., call for increasing the no-take area in the reserve to 28 percent by 2015. To reach that goal, the group says it would have to raise \$13.5 million by the end of 2014. Closing the entire reserve would require at least \$50 million, according to Greg Stone, Conservation International's Chief Scientist for Oceans.

"Creating marine reserves is like good cooking," said Stone, who came up with the idea for the Phoenix Islands reserve after a diving trip

Marine reserves

A growing number of marine reserves have been created that ban fishing in an area equivalent to the size of Mexico. Five more giant "no-take" reserves are currently on the drawing board. The largest reserves include:

- U.S. Marine National Monument:** In 2006, then-President George W. Bush designated some 140,000 square miles around the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.
- Chagos Islands:** In 2010, the United Kingdom created a 247,000 square-mile marine reserve around these islands in the Indian Ocean.
- Coral Sea:** In 2012, Australia created a 194,000 square-mile reserve of its northeast coast.

— Christopher Pala

there in 2000. "It takes time, you have to be patient."

Jay Nelson, who recently retired as director of Pew's Global Ocean Legacy program in Washington D.C., says it's unrealistic to think Conservation International could raise \$50 million because many donors believe the reserve is already a no-take zone.

"CI needs to admit that they won't be able to raise that kind of mon-

ey," Nelson warned.

A poor country

Kiribati is a poor country with few natural resources. Annual per-capita income is just \$3,300, according to the United Nations. Last year, revenue from fishing licenses accounted for half of the nation's national budget of \$120 million.

The reserve's closure "would be most detrimental to the economic interest of the Kiribati government," said Julio Moron, director of the Spanish tuna fleet association in Madrid.

But several fisheries experts say Kiribati could close the entire reserve without any revenue loss since it makes up only about 12 percent of the nation's exclusive economic zone of 1.3 million square miles. Commercial fishermen, they say, could easily fish around the reserve.

John Hampton, the region's chief fisheries scientist for the Oceanic Fisheries Program in New Caledonia, said he wouldn't expect many fishing operations to leave Kiribati "just because they're losing 12 percent of it."

At the same time, Teburoro Tito, Kiribati's ex-president and a member of the political opposition, said Tong should immediately close the reserve "to salvage the country's honor."

Christopher Pala is a freelance writer. His reporting was funded by the Ocean Foundation, a Washington, D.C., nonprofit that supports conservation of the world's oceans. E-mail: foreigndesk@sfgate.com

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