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## Editorial: More protection for remote isles

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Gov. David Ige has joined a growing call to extend boundaries around atolls and reefs about 900 miles south of Hawaii, adding another 425,639 square miles of protection to the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument.

President Joe Biden should answer this call to expand environmental protections in the central Pacific. An expanded preserve would become the nation's largest, encompassing 755,000 total square miles, and would be a praise-worthy aspect of the president's legacy.

In these times, when oceans are threatened by global warming and acidification from an overwhelming carbon load, an expanded monument would be a warranted investment that can pay off in both environmental and economic benefits.

The expansion would be timely. A global consensus is forming that it would be advantageous to set aside 30% of the Earth's habitats, both land- and ocean-based, to provide a sanctuary against extinction and to potentially "seed" areas degraded by climate change and human overuse. Biden has formally endorsed the effort, and pledged to expand preserves within the U.S. sphere of influence.

The Pacific Remote Islands Coalition — which includes researchers, educators, deep-sea voyagers, native and community leaders — leads the way on this initiative, and has petitioned the president to act.

The action would be bold, but it is not radical.

An expanded Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument would add to protected federal waters around the uninhabited Howland and Baker islands, Kingman Reef and Palmyra Atoll, designating the entirety of the U.S.-controlled waters around these locations as within monument boundaries. As previous presidents have, Biden can use his executive authority under the Antiquities Act to take the action.

Expanded, the monument would grow from the existing boundary, 50 nautical miles around the atolls and reefs, out to 200 nautical miles around the sites. At that size, it would surpass the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands — currently the world's largest protected area, as expanded by President Barack Obama in 2016.

Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument would become the largest “highly protected” marine protected area in the world, off-limits to mining, oil and gas prospecting, dredging and dumping, and with limits on fishing and aquaculture.

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration describes the current monument as “one of the most pristine tropical marine environments in the world, and vulnerable to the impacts of climate change and ocean acidification.”

Scientists and naturalists have discovered species of coral, fish, shellfish, marine mammals, birds, bugs and vegetation that can be found only in the area. The area hosts colonies of deep-water corals that are thousands of years old. Undersea mountains, or seamounts, hold new species and ecosystems.

There likely will be opposition from the commercial fishing industry, however. Before then-President George W. Bush created the Pacific Remote Islands ocean monument in 2009, the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council objected. Again, when Obama proposed expanding the ocean monument — achieved in 2014 — tuna fishermen objected because commercial fishing is prohibited within the boundaries.

However, advocates for expansion note that before 2014, the Hawaii longline fleet collected less than 5% of its catch from waters surrounding the monument.

It benefits Hawaii, the Pacific and the planet to protect unique global environments. Without permanent protection, there is no guarantee that future fishing won’t cause harm, or that other destructive practices such as undersea mining won’t encroach on these sanctuaries.