Cook Islands unveils world's largest marine park

Title

The world’s largest marine park has been launched in the Cook Islands located in the Pacific Ocean. Covering over one million square kilometres - 1.06 million km2 - the park will be three times the size of Australia's Great Barrier Reef Marine Park and twice as large as the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean that topped the list of marine protected areas (MPAs) for two years.

The ambitious undertaking is being pushed by an alliance of government agencies, conservation NGOs – including Te Ipukarea Society (BirdLife in the Cook Islands) - and the tourism industry. The marine park’s formal establishment last week marks just the beginning of a process likely to take years. The Cook Islands, that have a population of less than 18,000, were in the public recently at the Pacific Island Forum.

Cook Island Prime Minister Henry Puna announced the launch of the marine park in the presence of political leaders from the Asia-Pacific region during his opening address. U.S. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton joined the meeting on Friday morning. “The marine park will provide the necessary framework to promote sustainable development by balancing economic growth interests such as tourism, fishing and deep sea mining with conserving core biodiversity in the ocean,” Puna said.

"The Cooks' 15 islands have a combined landmass barely larger than Washington DC but their waters include environmentally valuable coral reefs and fisheries", said TIS Programme Manager Jacqui Evans. "The Cook Islands' protected zone will take in the entire southern half of the nation's waters."

With funds to raise, scientific data to collect, people to involve and zones to establish, the marine park is just at the beginning of a process that according to steering committee members will take several years. TIS are looking forward to working with overseas partners who have already expressed interest in helping establish the park.

“This is just the beginning of a journey that we hope will bring people together from different perspectives to agree on a way forward with ecologically sustainable development”, said Jacqui. The precise design is still pending. Developing a detailed database for the establishment of specific zones will be the next major step for the committee developing the park.

“We have to learn more about which species exist where exactly,” added Jacqui. Marea Hatziolos, the World Bank's senior coastal and marine specialist, said that the Cook Islands' initiative would help save fish stocks and promote tourism. "There's definitely an economic dimension to this, apart from protecting biodiversity," she said. "It allows small Pacific nations to generate revenue."