

Potential Economic and Political Fallout of Tuna Fishery Closures in Proposed PRIA Sanctuary



US purse seine vessels in American Samoa

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On March 21, 2023, President Biden directed the Secretary of Commerce to consider initiating the designation process for a proposed National Marine Sanctuary covering all U.S. waters around the Pacific Remote Island Areas (PRIA). NOAA launched the designation process in April and held scoping meetings in May 2023 throughout the Western Pacific Region. The public comment period closed June 2.

The draft sanctuary goals and objectives NOAA presented at the scoping meetings were vague and included language to "conserve, protect, and restore the marine biodiversity and ecosystems of the Pacific Remote Islands" and to "provide the necessary policy, programs, structure, and processes to ensure effective, integrated management..." The Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council has had sustainable fishing regulations in place under the Magnuson-Stevens Act for this area since the 1980s. In restructuring its management framework from species-based plans to place-based plans in the late 2000s, the Council was the first to recognize the importance of a comprehensive ecosystem approach. By doing so, the Council aimed to maintain the overall balance and functioning of the ecosystem, thereby supporting the long-term viability of fish stocks and the preservation of vulnerable species. Achieving the presented goals and objectives would not be mutually exclusive to well-monitored and sustainable fisheries.

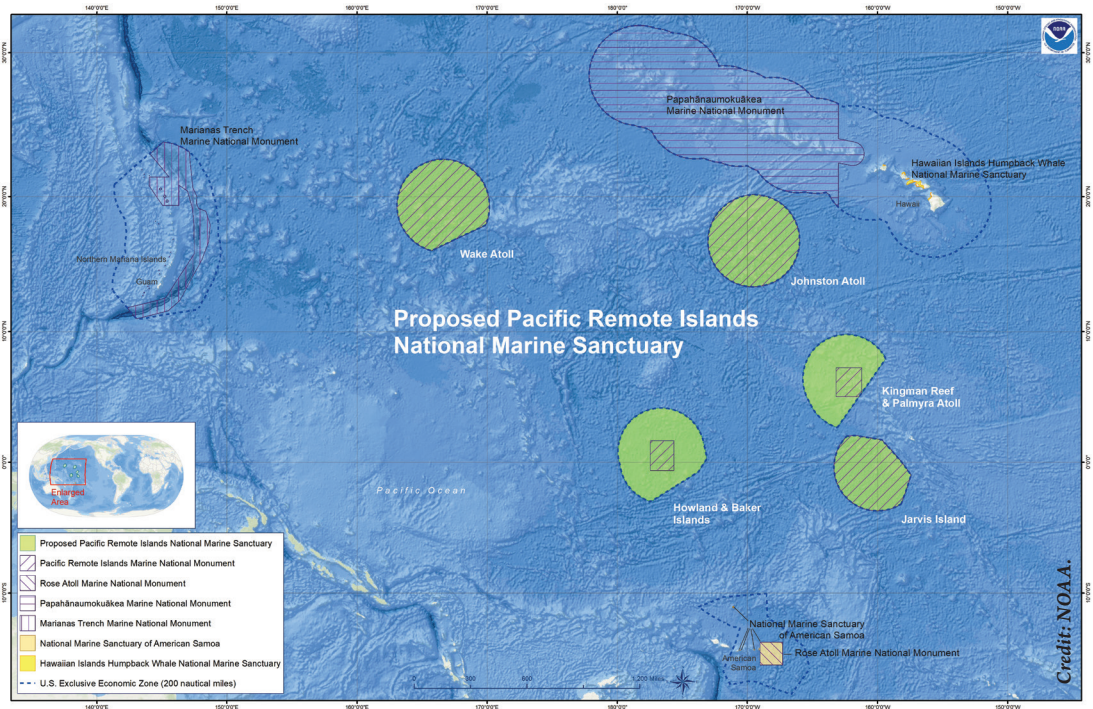
If the proposed sanctuary were to prohibit tuna fishing, the fishing industry and the communities that depend on it would face significant challenges. However, the conservation benefits of such a move to tuna stocks and the international landscape remain unclear as the proposal lacks supporting narratives.

Principal tuna species in tuna fisheries within the western and central Pacific Ocean (WCPO) are not overfished or experiencing overfishing (yellowfin, bigeye, skipjack, albacore). This is based on internationally accepted best scientific information available.¹ These fisheries do not interact with vulnerable reef or deep sea habitats either. In fact, these fisheries cannot legally operate within 50 nautical miles of the PRIA, well beyond the range of coral reefs at any depths where they could possibly interact with tuna fisheries.



Proposed PRIA Sanctuary

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In fact, MPAs can be counterproductive for conservation. The proposed sanctuary area is adjacent to the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), which is to be reopened in Kiribati for fishing access for Chinese tuna purse seine vessels. A recent study conducted by Pacific Community tuna experts, led by John Hampton, PhD, found that the PIPA closure had no measurable conservation benefits for tropical tuna species (Hampton et al., 2023²). In reality, the PIPA simply displaced fishing effort. Further

to be more effective than current input/output fishery management controls or other area-based management tools. Pons et al. (2022⁴) used real case studies with verifiable data to demonstrate that existing fishery management tools and dynamic area-based management tools are significantly more effective at protecting biodiversity than large “set it and forget it” closed areas. On the other hand, closing all U.S. waters to fishing within the PRIA presents some serious negative consequences that need to be evaluated.

Science does not support the idea that large marine protected areas conserve or protect pelagic ecosystems better than existing management tools.

hypothetic closures throughout the WCPO yielded minimal conservation benefits, even when 30% of waters are closed to tuna fishing (Hampton et al., 2023). If closing waters to tuna fishing had demonstrable conservation benefits, it would have been evident in the PIPA, where significant fishing activity had occurred before the closure. However, any potential “spillover” benefits of the proposed sanctuary would likely benefit Chinese fisheries instead, creating a “transferred effect” that could diminish the United States’ relevance in the Pacific tuna economy, as described below.

Hilborn et al. (2022³) also found that protection of biodiversity using large, static closures in open ocean blue water ecosystems is not proven

Economic Impact

Tuna fishing is a significant economic activity in the Pacific region, and the PRIA provide important fishing grounds for commercially valuable tuna species for a small number of U.S. vessels that contribute a significant economic benefit to American Samoa. Otherwise, these vessels are limited in their fishing access on the high seas through international measures or must pay tens of thousands of dollars a day to fish within the exclusive economic zones of other countries. Closing these areas to tuna fishing would result in a loss of fishing opportunities and potential revenue for fishermen. It could also discourage purse seine tuna boats from continuing to operate under the U.S. flag, which means they would no longer need to offload their catch in American Samoa, where 5,500 jobs are supported by the StarKist cannery. Following the closure of one cannery in the territory more than a decade ago, the gross domestic production fell by 25%. Closing the only remaining cannery

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STORY ICON KEY

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due to an economically constrained tuna supply could be disastrous.

Transferred Effects

Closing the PRIA to tuna fishing could result in increased fishing pressure in other areas of the Pacific Ocean and tip the balance in favor of foreign fisheries in global tuna markets. Fishermen may redirect their efforts to alternative fishing grounds, leading to unforeseen impacts. Foreign fisheries that are not bound by U.S. standards do not have environmental laws that reduce bycatch and interactions with nontarget or protected species (e.g., turtles, mammals and seabirds) and ensure minimal habitat impacts. Chan and Pan (2012⁵) found that increased production of the Hawai'i-based fishery reduced sea turtle interactions by replacing foreign production.

Food Security

Tuna is an important food source, both locally and globally. Closing the PRIA to tuna fishing could reduce the availability of this protein-rich resource, potentially affecting food security in the region. It may lead to increased reliance on imported seafood or alternative protein sources, which can have economic and nutritional implications for local communities.



Community members, including employees of Starkist Samoa, rallied against the proposed sanctuary for the PRIA prior to NOAA's public meeting held in American Samoa May 24, 2023.

National Security

Tuna is the #1 commodity shared between the United States and the strategically important Pacific Islands Region. Impeding tuna commerce in the region is contrary to the Indo-Pacific Strategy and Economic Framework put forward by the Biden Administration to counter geopolitical and economic threats to U.S. trade, including China. Eliminating the small number of U.S.-flagged vessels from the PRIA removes an important layer of on-the-water surveillance. The presence of U.S. fishing vessels, which are themselves fully monitored, provides verifiable information about any illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing and possible criminal activities in waters around the PRIA. IUU fishing is a significant problem in the Pacific, and the closure of the PRIA could create a "fishing vacuum" that could be exploited by foreign vessels.

The United States is competing for power in the Pacific region to counter the rise of China's growing influence. In the Pacific Islands, tuna fisheries are the leading source for economic development, so it is important for the country to have a strong fisheries presence. Fishery closures in the region could harm the economies of Pacific Island nations and send the wrong message about the United States' commitment to its Pacific Island Territories.

Fisheries management should strike a balance between conservation and the socioeconomic needs of communities. Any decision regarding the closure of the PRIA to tuna fishing would require careful consideration of these factors and the implementation of alternative measures to ensure the viability of U.S. tuna fisheries while minimizing negative consequences.

See the Council's new Marine Spatial Management web page for information on National Marine Sanctuary proposals, fishery management regulations in Monuments in the Western Pacific and more: www.wpcouncil.org/marine-spatial-management.

References

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- ² Hampton et al., 2023. www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fmars.2022.1060943/full
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- ⁴ Pons et al., 2022. www.pnas.org/doi/10.1073/pnas.2114508119
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NOAA Meeting on the National Marine Sanctuary for PRIA



Council on Environmental Quality Chair Brenda Mallory (center) was in Honolulu May 10, 2023, to open NOAA's public scoping meeting on the proposed National Marine Sanctuary for the PRIA. Mallory met briefly with Council member from Hawai'i Matt Ramsey and Council Executive Director Kitty Simonds.