

The Oregonian

An aquatic Eden, a new Yellowstone

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"People protect what they love," the legendary ocean explorer Jacques Cousteau once observed. If so, President Bush has fallen hard for the beauty and amazing wildlife of the chain of atolls, coral reefs and shoals of northwestern Hawaii.

In one surprising stroke Wednesday, a president never, ever labeled a conservationist created the world's largest marine sanctuary, bigger even than Australia's Great Barrier Reef.

This is a huge moment for marine conservation. The president has created the marine equivalent of Teddy Roosevelt's Yellowstone National Park, a sudden and major advance in conservation.

This new marine sanctuary will be more than seven times larger than all 13 other existing federal marine reserves combined. There is nothing half-hearted about the protection that Bush has ordered, either: All commercial and sportfishing in this vast area will be phased out in just five years.

Jacques Cousteau's son, Jean-Michel, spent five weeks filming in the northwestern Hawaiian islands, and not long ago showed his documentary, "Voyage to Kure," to President Bush and Laura Bush at the White House. Obviously, the first couple was moved by the incredible things they saw -- endangered green turtles, rare monk seals, millions of breeding seabirds -- all among some 7,000 species of marine life in the islands, a quarter of those species not found anywhere else on Earth.

Bush didn't have to step in and use his authority under the National Antiquities Act to protect the islands, surrounding waters and reefs. Already there was a longer, slower effort under way to create a national marine sanctuary, a different kind of protection. But there would have been lengthy fights over sanctuary rules with Pacific fishing fleets and seafood processing companies. Bush was right to cut the debate short, and use his executive power to protect this incredible area.

The challenge now is to introduce the president and other Americans to all the other spectacular ocean resources that demand more care and attention. Congress is now grappling with the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the central law governing offshore fishing in this country. Many fish stocks still are being hammered by over-fishing, coral reefs are suffering irreparable damage and fisheries managers still are turning a blind eye to "bycatch," several billion pounds a year of aquatic species, some of them endangered, caught accidentally in nets or long lines, killed and wasted.

Meanwhile, efforts to establish other, smaller marine reserves off the Oregon Coast and elsewhere keep running aground on objections from fishing groups and some coastal communities. Gov. Ted Kulongoski's call to create a coastwide marine sanctuary off of Oregon has been largely ignored.

But now President Bush has put the issue of marine conservation squarely in front of Americans. Everyone should pause to look at the photographs and video of the sanctuary that the president created. Surely when you see the awesome beauty and diversity of sea life there, you will fall in love, too.