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Marine Reserves Announced for Rapa Nui and Other Chilean Islands

by Benjamin Witte-Lebhar

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Chile has positioned itself at the vanguard of global ocean conservation by creating a quick succession of marine protected areas (MPAs), including a reserve of more than 700,000-sq-km around the remote Pacific island of Rapa Nui, also known as Easter Island. But while the protection push has earned plenty of applause, its pace and scope are raising doubts about enforcement and feasibility.

The Rapa Nui reserve is the largest of several MPAs the administration of President Michelle Bachelet announced in early September during a major conference on marine conservation—the 4th International Marine Protected Areas Congress (IMPAC4)—in La Serena, in the north-central region of Coquimbo.

It is also the only initiative of its kind to be decided in a local referendum. The vote was open specifically to native islanders and took place Sept. 3, following several years of consultations. More than two thirds of the nearly 650 participants voted in favor of the ambitious conservation project, which outlaws industrial fishing, underwater mining, and other extractive industries but allows people to continue fishing the waters around Easter Island using traditional techniques and equipment.

“This consultation was intended to respect the will of the Rapa Nui people with regards to creating a marine protected area that respects the ancestral use of the sea and its fishing habits,” said Marcelo Mena, Chile’s environmental minister. “It is also part of the government’s commitment to consolidate a collaborative and respectful way of working in the communities of our country.”

Rapa Nui, world famous for its mysterious moai statues, lies about 3,500 km west of mainland Chile, which annexed the 163-sq-km island in the late 1800s. The “special territory,” as it was designated in 2007, has fewer than 6,000 permanent residents, roughly 60% of whom are native Rapa Nui, and depends heavily on tourism.

Despite or perhaps because of its extreme isolation—the closest inhabited land is Pitcairn Island, more than 2,000 km away—the waters around Easter Island attract industrial fishing boats from as far away as Japan, China, and Spain, locals and environmental groups complain. The hope now is that the area’s new status as an official Chilean government-backed marine reserve will persuade outside fishers to steer clear.

“The principal problem for Rapa Nui is illegal fishing,” Chilean environmentalist Maximiliano Bellos of the Pew Charitable Trusts, a US-based organization that pushed hard for the Easter Island MPA, was quoted as saying in the Spanish daily *El País*. “We know that for years there has been interest from other nations in accessing Rapa Nui’s resources, specifically tuna, swordfish, and sharks. They’re particularly vulnerable species that are being over-fished.”

Still, declaring the waters around Rapa Nui off limits is one thing. Enforcing it is quite another, especially given how far from mainland Chile the island lies, and how enormous the MPA around

it is: as large as Chile itself and twice the size of Germany. As Poki Tane Haoa, a fisher and government representative on the island said during an appearance at the IMPAC4, "The fight has just begun. As a people, we will continue shouting, continue saying: No to illegal fishing. No to industrial fishing in our waters. No to mining."

World leader

Minister Mena admits that enforcement is a major problem but says his office is coordinating with the Chilean Navy and working with Great Britain on ways to use satellite imagery to spot illegal fishing boats. A vessel identified as such, he suggests, won't be able to disembark afterward in a Chilean port. It's clear, though, that the Navy cannot be everywhere at all times, especially for a country that—even without taking into account Rapa Nui and other islands under its control—has one of the longest coastlines in the world and fewer than 100 vessels to patrol it.

Complicating matters further is the pace at which the Bachelet administration has designated new MPAs. At last month's IMPAC4, the government also announced the creation of a 147,000-sq-km marine reserve around Cape Horn and the Diego Ramírez Islands, near southern Chile's Tierra del Fuego archipelago; and the extension of an MPA around the Juan Fernández Islands, which lie approximately 670 km west of the Chilean mainland. The reconfigured Juan Fernández MPA covers some 480,000 sq km. Two years earlier, the government created a 300,000-sq-km reserve around another cluster of islands, the Desventuradas (Unfortunate Islands), which lie approximately 850 km offshore.

Together, the announcements make for some impressive numbers. From less than 500,000 sq km worth of MPAs at the start of the year, Chile now has approximately 1.8 million sq km under protection. The new MPAs also ensure Chile's compliance with one of the key benchmarks of the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), a multilateral treaty that, among other things, calls for party nations to protect 10% of their marine areas by 2020.

Chile was able to further cement its stature as a global leader in ocean protection by hosting and helping organize this year's IMPAC gathering, which brought together hundreds of experts from some 80 countries. The three previous IMPAC summits all took place in developed countries: Australia (2005), France (2009), and the US (2013). "We are becoming the country with the largest protected marine area in the world, a developing country that can be a leader in conservation," President Bachelet—who will leave office in March after two, non-consecutive terms—told IMPAC delegates last month. "This is not a triumph of the government, it is a triumph of reason."

Low-hanging fruit

The question remains, nevertheless, as to how Chile will manage its many MPAs and make sure they're more than what conservationists call "paper parks." As more than a few participants in the IMPAC conference noted, designating large swaths of ocean water as MPAs is a crucial first step but doesn't on its own guarantee protection. "It isn't just about measuring the coverage; it's the coverage plus the quality," Lance Morgan, president of the Marine Conservation Institute, in Seattle, Washington, told the digital media project Oceans Deeply.

Another area of concern for environmentalists is that in the race to rack up impressive MPA coverage numbers, Chile and other countries are opting for so-called low-hanging fruit. In other words, they are protecting remote areas with little to nothing in the way of industrial or commercial

activity while ignoring more populous, centrally-located areas where conservation goals would likely come into conflict with business interests. In the case of Chile, observers note, only a fraction of its total MPA coverage includes the continental coastline. And yet, those are the areas, environmentalists argue, that are most impacted by pollution, industrial fishing, and other human activities, and thus most in need of protection, or at the very least, improved resource management ([NotiSur, June 24, 2016](#)).

Human activity is spelling serious trouble for a number of iconic marine species, from sei whales (*Balaenoptera borealis*) and Humboldt penguins, to all four species of Chile's sea turtle, ecologists warn. The same goes for the fish stocks on which the country's industrial and small-scale fishers depend ([NotiSur, Dec. 14, 2012](#)).

Fishing is a hugely important activity in Chile, but after peaking in the 1990s, catch volumes have declined, presumably as a result of dwindling stocks, according to a report published last year by the Universidad de Chile. The study found that between 1999 and 2015, catch totals of the most common pelagic (shallow to medium-depth) fish such as reineta (southern ray's bream), Chilean jack mackerel, and sardines dropped more than 70%. The decline was even more pronounced for demersal (sea-floor) fish such as hake and conger eels, for which catch totals fell by more than 82%.

"Efforts have been made to protect island areas, but those are only some of [Chile's] marine ecosystems," Miriam Fernández, director of the Universidad Católica's Núcleo Milenio Centro de Conservación Marina, a marine conservation institute, told the daily *La Tercera* late last year. "Zones with high impact from fishing also need conservation—along the northern and central [coastline], where ecosystems are impacted by fishing, and in the [southern] fjords, which are suffering the impact of fish farming."

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