

Vaikava Rapa Nui

Easter Island's Rapa Nui people uphold tradition as guardians of the ocean

Easter Island, a territory of Chile that lies some 4,000 kilometers (2,485 miles) west of that country's coast, is world famous for its Moai statues, which are recognized as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Now the treasures off the shores of this remote island are safeguarded as well with the creation of the Rapa Nui Multiple Use Marine Coastal Protected Area in 2018. The surrounding waters, which contain unique biodiversity, feed the local Rapa Nui people and help them continue centuries-old cultural traditions.

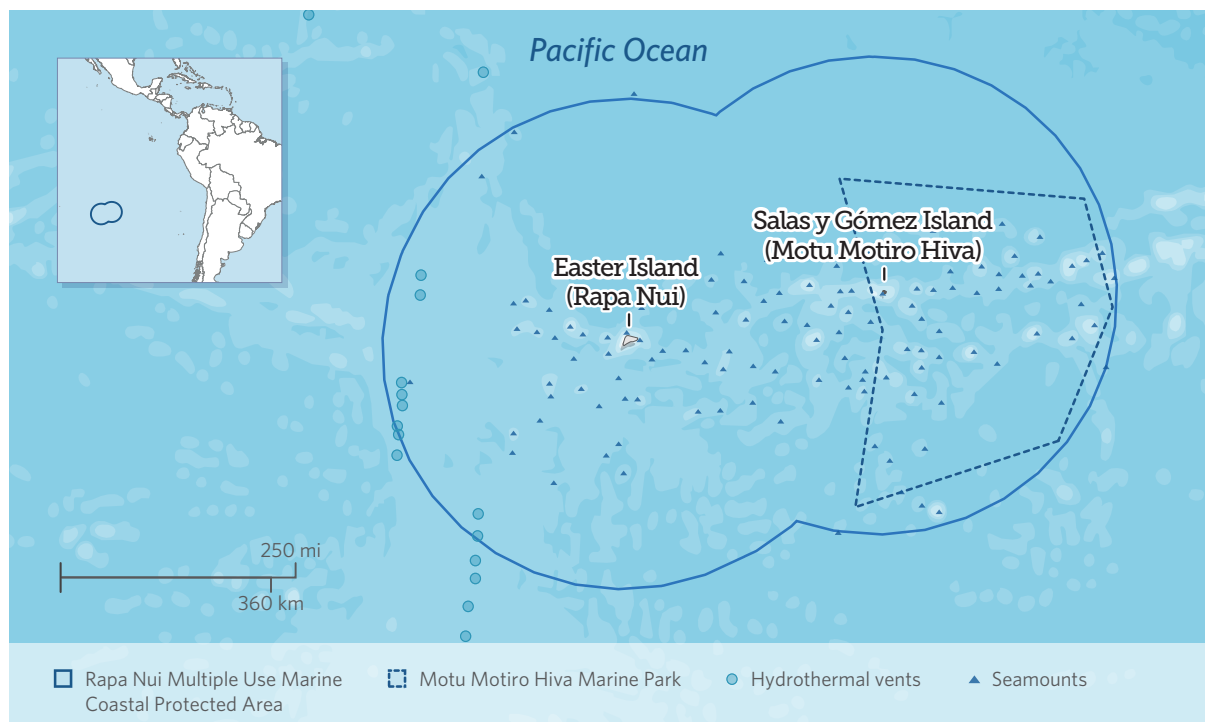
Though still largely unexplored, Easter Island's waters are known to contain geological hot spots teeming with life in an area of the Pacific Ocean that is otherwise extremely poor in nutrients. A chain of underwater seamounts provides conditions that help sustain unique wildlife such as the Easter Island butterflyfish, or *tipi tipi* in local dialect, and the Nazca bigeye—two of the more than 140 species found only in Rapa Nui waters. The area also harbors 27 Threatened or Endangered species, according to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, and is an important spawning ground for many species, including tuna, marlins, and swordfish. The seafloor off the island is also home to the only hydrothermal vents in Chilean waters.

Overfishing threatens the island's biodiversity

Increasingly, commercial fishing fleets are pushing into every nook of the world's oceans. Left unchecked, this activity could quickly—and irreversibly—damage Easter Island's special marine environment. Satellite data gathered and analyzed under a project supported by The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Bertarelli Foundation show that despite the island's isolation, industrial fishing had probably occurred around Easter Island.

To guard against such an occurrence, the Rapa Nui community worked to create a large MPA around the island that will be off-limits to industrial commercial fishing and other extractive activities, while traditional Rapa Nui fishing practices will be protected. The Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project collaborated with the islanders on this effort, which establishes the Rapa Nui people as global leaders in ocean conservation and in preservation of an indigenous culture strongly tied to the ocean.

Rapa Nui Multiple Use Marine Coastal Protected Area



Note: Rapa Nui Multiple Use Marine Coastal Protected Area safeguards the 720,000-square-kilometer (277,994-square-mile) exclusive economic zone that surrounds Easter Island, Chile, and includes the already established Motu Motiro Hiva Marine Park.

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MPA continues tradition of conservation

After years of efforts by the Rapa Nui to protect their unique marine ecosystems, Chilean President Michelle Bachelet signed the decree creating the Rapa Nui MPA on Feb. 27, 2018.

By securing designation of the MPA and playing an essential role in its management, Easter Islanders are protecting waters that figure centrally in long-standing cultural traditions, such as their custom of using handheld lines and rocks to catch fish.

Shortly after taking office that same year, President Sebastián Piñera established the Ocean Council to guide management of the protected area. The 11 members include six Rapa Nui elected by the community, the governor of Easter Island, and one representative each from the Development Council known as CODEIPA, the Ministry of Environment, Undersecretary of Fisheries, and Ministry of Defense. The council is working to develop a management plan for the MPA, plan the construction of a science and education center, and ensure the island's artisanal fisheries are managed sustainably.



Max Bello/The Pew Charitable Trusts



Eduardo Sorensen/The Pew Charitable Trusts



Eduardo Sorensen/The Pew Charitable Trusts

Top: Easter Island is celebrated for its hundreds of striking stone Moai statues.

Above left: Marine species, including the moray eel, depend on the healthy corals found in Easter Island's waters.

Above right: Easter Island's waters are known to contain geological hot spots and oases teeming with life.



Easter Island is home to 142 endemic species, including the Easter Island butterflyfish.



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Eduardo Sorensen / The Pew Charitable Trusts

Rapa Nui fishing practices are passed down from generation to generation.

Seafaring history links the Rapa Nui people to the sea

Ancient Polynesians sailed the Pacific for thousands of years, using the stars and currents as their guides. Those seafaring skills and deep connection to the ocean helped to shape the modern-day Rapa Nui. Protecting Easter Island's waters allows the locals to sustain and strengthen their ties to their natural environment and to their ancestors.



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Top: Easter Island's waters contain some of the world's healthiest coral reef systems.

Above: Easter Island hosts many fish species, including the Chinese trumpetfish.

This fact sheet was updated in August 2023 to reflect the updated name of the Rapa Nui Multiple Use Marine Coastal Protected Area.

For further information, please visit: pewtrusts.org/oceanlegacy

Pew Bertarelli OCEAN LEGACY

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The Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project | The Pew Charitable Trusts and Dona Bertarelli created the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project, with the shared goal of establishing the first generation of ecologically significant, large, and effective marine protected areas (MPAs) around the world. Today, the Pew Bertarelli Ocean Legacy Project also seeks to connect MPAs and help conserve key migratory species and entire marine ecosystems. These efforts build on more than a decade of work by Pew and the Bertarelli Foundation, led by Dona Bertarelli, to create large-scale, highly or fully protected MPAs. Between them, they have helped to obtain designations or commitments to safeguard nearly 12.6 million square kilometers (4.8 million square miles) of ocean by working with communities, local leaders, philanthropic partners, Indigenous groups, government officials, and scientists. Dona Bertarelli is a philanthropist, investor, sportswoman, and strong advocate for ocean conservation. The Pew Charitable Trusts is driven by the power of knowledge to solve today's most challenging problems, including the need for effective marine conservation.