

'Wildlife overload' on Midway shows the results of restoration

By Sarah Zoellick

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Artist Wyland, left, Sylvia Earle and Susan Middleton discussed Thursday what they discovered while exploring the Midway Atoll National Wildlife and the Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument. Wyland held up a book of photos of wildlife of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands.



ANDY COLLINS / NOAA OFFICE OF NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES

Sylvia Earle poses with a nesting Laysan albatross at the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge.

A wildlife revival around the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands is giving scientists a glimpse of what the main Hawaiian Islands looked like thousands of years ago -- and researchers said Thursday they hope the environmental renaissance of sorts will spur similar endeavors around the world.

"It's wildlife overload," said Andy Collins, education coordinator for the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of National Marine Sanctuaries. "A window to the past ... a living memory."

Collins was part of a small team of researchers from the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, the state Department of Land and Natural Resources and NOAA that returned Thursday from a six-day trip to Midway.

The team also included renowned oceanographer and National Geographic explorer-in-residence Sylvia Earle, Hawaii artist Wyland and photographer Susan Middleton.

"Midway is a big hope spot," Earle said. During the Battle of Midway in 1942, it became a center of destruction. Now it serves as a stage for conservation.

Midway is part of the 139,797-square-mile Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, which encircles Hawaii's northwestern chain of islands -- one of the largest conservation areas in the world. It's also the only visitable island of the chain, with no more than 70 people, including visitors and residents, stationed on it at a time.

Michelle Jones, DLNR information and education coordinator, said she's witnessed an evident change on the island as native grasses are restored. Doves of birds nest along the airfield.

More than 1 million albatrosses now populate the island, Collins said, and more than a million petrel birds take flight at night, too.

"We can't go back to the way things were, but we can make things better than they are," Earle said.

The purpose of the trip, according to Earle, was to observe the positive efforts to restore and protect the natural systems on Midway and incorporate them into global communications regarding preserving the planet.

Although Earle and Wyland were visiting the island for the first time, Middleton, the photographer, was a return visitor. She described Midway as a microcosm of what can happen worldwide.

"This is a place we could learn from," she said. "The only reason it is intact as much as it is, is because we humans have been protecting it."

Wyland, who painted a mural on Charlie Barracks during the trip, further emphasized the need to turn what's going on in the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands into a learning experience, especially considering recent reports of humans striking out against endangered Hawaiian monk seals.

"You don't need rules and regulations if people have it in their heart and they care," he said, adding that laws do little to curtail the actions of people uncommitted to a cause.

Earle and Wyland said they plan to use footage from the trip to produce a documentary called "Offshore Islands: Hawaii's Hope Spots."