

Reverse Fishing in the Phoenix Islands, Kiribati

Presented at: A Private Sector Approach –
Conservation Agreements in support of Marine Protection



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Abstract

The Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA) is a unique conservation partnership between the Republic of Kiribati and two non-governmental organizations, the New England Aquarium (NEAq) and Conservation International (CI). Initially, the New England Aquarium led the scientific surveys of the Phoenix Islands and formed the conservation relationship with key Kiribati officials. NEAq is now helping coordinate the implementation team, fundraising, and the future research agenda for the project. Conservation International, directly through regional staff and indirectly through an implementation grant from CI's Global Conservation Fund, has been instrumental in coordinating and staffing the implementation stages of the project and supporting World Heritage recognition of the site. The core mechanism underlying the PIPA is a unique "reverse fishing license" financing program by which Kiribati will be reimbursed for the amount that they would have otherwise received from selling fishing licenses to foreign fishing operations in the PIPA. A statutory trust will be created under Kiribati law to hold the trust funds and to distribute funds from the trust to pay for the "reverse fishing license," the terms of which will be established under a conservation contract between Kiribati and the PIPA Trust. The trust will be administered to ensure the long-term sustainability of this remarkable place.



Social-Economic Consideration

The creation of the PIPA was dramatically simplified by the fact that there are no tenure rights associated with traditional settlements on the atolls or any other private property rights. The development of additional PIPA management and research capacity on Abariringa will be a benefit to the existing group of government employees who are settled there, who feel relatively isolated. The project is expected to benefit Kiribati people with a science interest and business people through employment opportunities associated with the eco-tourism and research facilities that are expected to develop in PIPA over time. Additional benefits will be realized to Kiribati by restoration of the World War II-era runway on Abariringa. The runway will help unite the country across its vast central Pacific reaches by providing a refueling site between Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in the west and Kirimati Island in the Line Islands in the east.



Agreement Mechanism

The Phoenix Islands and the surrounding 200-mile Kiribati Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are sovereign territory of the Republic of Kiribati. The Phoenix Islands Protected Area (PIPA), which comprises most of this area in the central Pacific Ocean, will be managed pursuant to the terms of a conservation contract executed between Kiribati and a new statutory trust organization, the PIPA Trust, created under Kiribati law as a non-for-profit corporation

The "conservation contract" with the government will define the management obligations and performance metrics to ensure the long-term protection of the terrestrial, coral, and oceanic natural resources as well as any cultural resources within the PIPA. The conservation contract has been referred to as a "reverse fishing license" by the Kiribati officials, because the government will be reimbursed by a third party for foregoing fishing in the PIPA instead of the usual arrangement of being reimbursed for authorizing fishing access.

In return for satisfactory performance under the contract, the Trust will make periodic payments to the government from income earned on the Rawaki Trust, a fund that will be established with private and public contributions. The term of the conservation contract has not been set yet but the conservation partners expect that in the early years a 5-10 year term may be reasonable.

The Republic of Kiribati has full sovereign ownership over the atoll resources in the PIPA and sovereign control over the PIPA EEZ. There are no indigenous rights.

The conservation contract will be enforceable under the domestic contract law of Kiribati and is specifically identified as an appropriate mechanism in the generic protected area legislation that was enacted in 2008 under which the PIPA is declared.

The direct effect of the PIPA conservation initiative is to restrict significant fishing activity in a "least developed" nation state that relies on fishery access fees from the DWN fleets for between 30% and 45% of its annual operating budget. Foreign fishing revenues are the single most significant source of national revenues.

Process & Issues

The goal of the conservation contract and the trust fund is to make this transition economically, and thus politically, neutral to the government. The viability of this discussion with the government for the conservation partners is aided by Kiribati's positive experience with the benefits of trust funds, arising from settlements for historic phosphate mining on several Kiribati atolls before independence in 1979. Kiribati has grown these "phosphate funds" through careful investments and funds management into a sizable endowment that produces significant income every year to help support the national budget.

The early stages of this project consisted of four elements:

1. public education in Kiribati about the Phoenix group;
2. relationship development with key officials and bureaucrats within the government of Kiribati;
3. external networking, including particularly the early partnership with Conservation International, who provided both expertise in working in the Pacific and implementation funding; and
4. development of a Phoenix Islands database that collated all that was known about the eight atolls. Other key relationships were established during this time with the Australian and New Zealand government.



This project is working at a regional sea scale, which presents significant management, administrative, enforcement, and financial challenges. One of the most important tasks of the management planning process will be to identify priorities within this large system.

There are a number of other atolls in the central Pacific under US ownership and others under private ownership that are already protected or are being considered for protection. PIPA partners have not yet had discussions with representatives from these sites but it is logical to assume that there may be a number of efficiencies associated with sharing certain tasks such as enforcement and monitoring.

Conclusions

- CI has used similar approaches with conservation contracts on land to protect forest resources but this is the first application of this approach in the marine environment.
- Relationships, relationships, relationships. The early and candid conversations with Kiribati officials, including specifically the President, have helped to shape this as a true partnership with the government.
- We need to recognize the specific fiscal and political circumstances faced by a least developed or under developed nation and develop conservation strategies, including conservation payments where appropriate, that work well for the affected government, the affected indigenous people, and the ecosystem.

Acknowledgement

Government of Kiribati,
New England Aquarium,
Conservation Law Foundation,
Conservation International, and
Phoenix Islands Protected Area Office