



# EMPEROR SEAMOUNTS

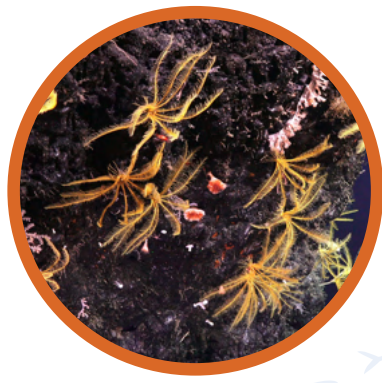
## THE HIDDEN NATURAL WONDERS OF THE WORLD

### INTRODUCING A PATH TO CREATING THE FIRST GENERATION OF HIGH SEAS MARINE PROTECTED AREAS

Currently, no legal mechanism exists to establish comprehensive marine protected areas (MPAs) in the high seas. It is critical that the new United Nations High Seas Treaty, currently under negotiation, sets up a global process for the establishment and effective management of a network of representative and well-connected MPAs in the high seas, including highly and fully protected areas where no harmful industrial activities are allowed.



People might not think of the Hawaiian Islands as part of a vast underwater mountain range, but in a manner of speaking that's what they are – the unsubmerged parts of the mountain range. Extending across over 2,000 km of seafloor between the north westernmost point of the Hawaiian Islands and the Kuril-Kamchatka Trench lies a chain of more than 80 underwater mountains - the Emperor Seamounts. Nine of the peaks of the seamounts bear the names of revered Japanese rulers from the last two millennia, an appropriate symbol of their imperial majesty.



The nutrient-rich waters of the Emperor Seamounts support vast biodiversity. Tunas and whales swim above their summits, and the skies are filled with seabirds. The world's oldest known wild bird, an albatross named Wisdom, has been foraging in the area for at least the last 70 years. Longevity is a theme below the waves too – a hugely varied array of cold-water corals have formed most of the complex sea-floor habitats along the mountain chain, slowly growing millimeters each year. Among these, black corals are some of the oldest animals on Earth – there are colonies on the Emperor Seamounts which date back an astonishing 4,200 years. Among the deep-water habitats, diverse corals and sponges make beautiful forests of fans, trees, whips and other forms, providing shelter for countless fish species and a high number of invertebrates.

In the North Pacific, the Emperor Seamounts are an artery of biodiversity cutting across the often featureless deep sea. Scientists believe that these underwater mountains act like stepping stones for a multitude of marine animals, with each unique seamount acting as a staging post that affects how species are distributed and allowing gene flow to occur across vastly separated populations.

## Threats and the future

In ecological terms, the Emperor Seamounts have paid heavily for the rich life they support. Between the 1960s and the 1970s they provided the highest takes of any seamount fisheries in the world, with more than 200,000 tonnes of fish and coral alike removed in peak years. Today, precious coral skeletons can sell for up to \$880/kg for use in jewelry and other industries. But deep-water trawling destroys the ecosystems it relies on: 19-29% of research images taken along the Emperor Seamount range show trawling scars, with abandoned fishing gear often visible in vast areas of barren ground, coral stumps and coral rubble. Deep-water species reproduce and grow extraordinarily slowly, and these areas may take centuries to recover – if at all, unless and until bottom fishing stops completely. In addition, we are only just beginning to understand the impacts of climate change on these sensitive slow-growing benthic communities.



There are still some active bottom fisheries in the international waters that make up the majority of the Emperor Seamounts – mostly drifting longlines and squid jigging – but there is so much there worth saving that the benefits of current fishing practices are questionable at best. Indeed, the presence of deep-sea hard coral reefs is enough for large swaths of the Emperor Seamount chain to be classified as vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) and ecologically and biologically significant areas (EBSAs), with stringently careful fisheries management policies to match. The US has taken the lead by protecting the seamounts which fall within its EEZ, and there are already encouraging signs of recovery of coral colonies in previously trawled areas – but it's the remaining areas that most need our immediate action to protect.

The World Congress on Protected Areas and many others have called for the Emperor Seamounts to receive priority protection. By permanently closing the area to fishing and establishing a high seas MPA through a new UN High Seas Treaty, we can save the Emperor Seamounts for ourselves and for future generations. Because this unique and special place is a global common, we can only effectively protect this area for ourselves and future generations through an international treaty.



## Calls to action

If you would like to see these special areas protected, tell your leaders by [signing this petition](#), and support the conclusion of a robust treaty as soon as possible. Want to learn more about the High Seas treaty, what countries are saying and how it could transform how we conserve biodiversity in our ocean? Check out our [Treaty Tracker here](#). Keep updated with the High Seas Alliance on Twitter.