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The Savior of the Seas

Greg Stone has been working to defend our oceans for decades, but creating the world's largest marine protected area made 2008 his defining year.



(Photograph by Cat Holloway)

By Neil Swidey
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Here's the thing about bold strokes of conservation: There are always lots of logical reasons why they shouldn't happen, at least not right then.

In 1872, President Ulysses S. Grant signed a law creating Yellowstone National Park. The idea -- preserving an unspoiled ecosystem that yawned across more than 3,000 square miles -- was at the time radical to the point of being preposterous. How else to explain why it would be a new country just emerging from a Treasury-depleting civil war that would step forward to create the world's first national park? Yellowstone happened only because it had a few relentless visionaries pushing for it and not many other people paying much attention. The massive new park received no federal funds, forcing its unpaid superintendent to moonlight at another job.

It is impossible to imagine another Yellowstone being created today. There'd be so many private landowners and moneyed interests bickering about it that it would never get past its first public hearing.

In fact, there aren't many great swaths of unspoiled green earth left to be preserved. The blue stuff is our best hope now, and nobody gets that better than Greg Stone.

What began nearly a decade ago with an unexpected invitation from a dive-boat captain in Fiji to explore the Central Pacific waters around the Phoenix Islands has turned into the cause of a lifetime for the 51-year-old Stone. The vice president of global marine programs for the New England Aquarium, Stone divides his time between Boston and New Zealand and has dived the world over. But everything changed for him in 2000 when he sank down into the pristine waters around the mostly unpopulated eight-atoll necklace that is the Phoenix Islands, located halfway between Hawaii and Fiji. As he gazed at the coral reef that looked dealer-showroom new, and he was swarmed by schools of fish so dense they blocked the sunlight and so diverse that some of them were unknown to science, Stone was blown away. "It must have been what it felt like for Lewis and Clark," he says. "We saw what the oceans were like a thousand years ago."

Other marine lovers might have been content to spread the news to their colleagues and move on, or to document the discoveries lurking below the surface. Stone did both those things. But he also decided to do more. He was determined to preserve this underwater wonderland so that divers a century from now might enjoy the same transformative experience, rather than finding yet another ecosystem ravaged by overfishing and pollution and all the other calling cards we humans tend to leave behind. And he knew that by limiting these human-caused stressors, the coral reefs would have a better shot of surviving the corrosive effects of global climate change.

Stone spent years in shuttle diplomacy with the government of the tiny Micronesian Republic of Kiribati (KIR-ee-bahs) that controls the Phoenix Islands and the waters around it. He crafted a plan that would turn the area into a protected marine reserve and close it off from commercial fishing. Because fees from foreign commercial fishing companies accounted for a big chunk of Kiribati's annual revenues, Stone enlisted the environmental group Conservation International to create an endowment that would compensate the nation of roughly 100,000 people for the lost revenue. In 2006, the Phoenix Islands Protected Area (phoenixislands.org) became a reality, but Stone didn't stop there. He deepened his partnership with Kiribati's president, Aote Tong, who was educated at the London School of Economics and has brought a forward-thinking approach to leading his nation.

Earlier this year, Kiribati officially doubled the size of the Phoenix Islands Protected Area -- to more than 158,000 square miles, or about 50 times the size of Yellowstone -- making it the largest marine protected area in the world.

"Greg has very much been the push behind this," Tong says. "We've become good friends. We trust each other, understand each other."

Stone, who is married, grew up in Walpole and Framingham, compensating for his landlocked status by swimming at the Y and wearing his mask as he sat in front of the TV watching Jacques Cousteau specials and Sea Hunt. These days, he has wispy hair and a scruffy beard and a CV and passport that suggest a sort of swashbuckling Indiana Jones of the seas. In reality, he's a soft-spoken, modest guy who knows how to forge relationships. And that may explain his groundbreaking success as much as his relentless advocacy.

That, and a lot of luck. In the winter of 2005, as he fretted about whether the Phoenix Islands plan would win approval, Stone watched a PBS documentary about NASA's Exploration Rover team and its hunt for evidence of past water on Mars. One of the planetary geologists featured in the documentary had spent 15 years trying to prove that a certain crater was once the site of an enormous lake. But after the rover landed, it became clear she'd been spectacularly wrong.

"You do research, do exploration, and you hope for a good outcome," Stone says. "But you can't guarantee that it will come."

His legacy is far from done. Not long ago, as he was walking down a hot road in La Paz, Mexico, his cellphone rang. It was a Bush administration official who knew about his work in the Phoenix Islands and wanted some advice. Watching the clock wind down on his presidency, George Bush, who already had created one large marine protected area in the Pacific in 2007, was contemplating two more. He may not leave the White House with much of a green legacy, but he could well have a blue one.

Stone smiles at the prospect of nations outdoing one another to lay claim to having the world's largest protected area. "I'm happy," he says, "to be in an arms race to protect the ocean."

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