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OUR OPINION

Do no harm in researching Papahānaumokuākea

THE ISSUE

The state has approved permits for research in the Northwestern Hawaiian islands.

IN THE YEAR since its declaration as a marine national monument, Papahānaumokuākea has received a flood of attention from a variety of enterprises that had previously been unaware of the stretch of small islands and atolls and the ocean that surrounds them.

Many did not understand that the monument designation is meant to provide protection and thus the area would not be open for activities like extreme sporting events, so-called reality television shows or for filmmakers seeking a picturesque backdrop.

The islands' remoteness did much to dissuade such impulses, but the appetite for research -- for conservation and extractive purposes -- remains a potential threat as long as a comprehensive strategy that balances protection and exploration isn't in place.

As with most government tasks, a number of issues need sorting out. With the state and two federal agencies overseeing the permitting process, there will undoubtedly be conflicts. However, at the forefront of all decisions should be the preservation of one of the few places left on the planet that has yet to bear an irreparably damaged footprint of human activity.

The state last week approved permits for research that some feared would allow "bioprospecting," or the taking of plants and animals that could lead to proprietary claims of natural resources found to have commercial value. But scientists from the Hawaii Institute of Marine Biology of the University of Hawaii denied they were doing such research and signed a waiver stating so.

Still, researchers will be allowed to dump untreated human waste into the ocean surrounding the monument because the ship they will be using isn't currently equipped to treat sewage properly.

The monument was established to prevent further harm to the islands and ocean. Care must be taken so that in studying it for protection, the marine and land environments don't suffer.

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