

UNITED STATES OF AMERICA - OUTLYING ISLANDS

INTRODUCTION

Area: Midway 5.18 sq.km; Johnston 2.52 sq.km; Wake 7.4 sq.km; Palmyra 6.56 sq.km; Kingman Reef 0.03 sq.km; Jarvis 4.45 sq.km; Howland 1.62 sq.km; Baker 1.24 sq.km.

Population: Midway 2,300 (1981); Johnston 1,000 (1981); Wake 1,600 (1981). Palmyra, Kingman Reef, Jarvis, Howland and Baker are uninhabited.

Three isolated islands in the North Pacific (Midway, Johnston and Wake), three of the Line Islands (Palmyra, Kingman Reef and Jarvis) straddling the Equator, and two islands at the northern end of the Phoenix Islands (Howland and Baker), almost on the Equator, are unincorporated U.S. possessions.

Midway Atoll (28°15'N, 177°20'W), the northwesternmost atoll in the Hawaiian chain, comprises a circular coral atoll with two low sandy islands, Sand Island and Eastern Island, approximately 1,850 km northwest of Oahu. The atoll was discovered in 1859 and annexed by the U.S.A. in 1867. It has been used as a commercial aircraft stopover since 1935, and has been an important military airbase since 1941 under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Navy (UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Johnston Atoll (16°45'N, 169°32'E) comprises a coral atoll with two natural islands, Johnston and Sand, and two artificial islets, North (Akau) and East (Hikina), created by construction work in 1963-64. The atoll is situated approximately 1,320 km southwest of Oahu. It was discovered in 1796, claimed by Hawaii in 1858, and taken over by the U.S. Navy in 1934. Guano was exported by the U.S.A. during the second half of the 19th century, and an airforce base was established in the 1940s. The islands are now under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Department of Defence and are used by the Defense Nuclear Agency as a store for chemical munitions. Considerable controversy surrounded the recent construction of an incinerator on the island for the destruction of nerve gas and other chemical weapons (IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Wake Atoll (19°18'N, 166°35'E) comprises a coral atoll with three small islands, Wilkes, Wake and Peal, approximately 1,200 km north of Kwajalein in the Marshall Islands. The islands were discovered in 1841, and annexed by the U.S.A. in 1898. A seaplane base opened in 1935, and the islands became important as a stopover for trans-Pacific flights. Wake has been administered by the U.S. Air Force since 1972, and is an important airforce base (UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Palmyra (5°52'N, 162°05'W) is an uninhabited atoll with a number of small, low islets around a lagoon complex on a platform reef. It lies near the western end of the Line Islands, approximately 1,600 km south of Oahu. The atoll was discovered in 1802, claimed by Hawaii in 1862 and annexed by the U.S.A. in 1912. It has been privately owned since about 1900, but is now unoccupied. However, it was an important air transport base during World War II, and the U.S. Air Force continued to use the landing strip until 1961. Originally there were 52 small islets in the atoll, but many of these were linked together during the war and there are now only 39. A proposal to use Palmyra for storage of nuclear waste in 1979 was rejected (Dahl, 1986; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Kingman Reef (c.6°32'N, 162°17'W) is a triangular reef with one tiny coral islet, about 75 km north-northwest of Palmyra. According to some reports, in heavy seas the entire island is submerged. The reef was used as a seaplane station in 1937 and 1938, but has otherwise been undisturbed (Dahl, 1986; North, 1990).

Jarvis Island (0°23'S, 160°01'W) is a low, flat coral island surrounded by a fringing reef in the Line Islands, approximately 2,100 km south of Oahu. The island was occupied during World War II, but is now uninhabited (Dahl, 1986; IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Howland Island (0°48'N, 176°38'W) is a low, flat coral island surrounded by a fringing reef at the northern end of the Phoenix Islands, approximately 1,150 km east of Tarawa in Kiribati. The island was annexed by the U.S.A. in 1856 and was an important source of guano between 1859 and 1878. An airstrip and lighthouse were built in 1937 and the island was occupied during World War II, but is now uninhabited (Dahl, 1986; IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Baker Island (0°12'N, 176°29'W) is a small coral island surrounded by a fringing reef, approximately 58 km southeast of Howland. Guano was mined in the late 19th century, and the island was occupied during World War II, but it has been uninhabited since then (Dahl, 1986; IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

The legal status of seven of these islands is currently under dispute, with the State of Hawaii seeking to extend its boundaries to include Midway, Howland, Baker, Jarvis, Kingman Reef and Palmyra, and the State of Guam seeking to add Wake (locally known as Enenkio) to its territory (North, 1990). The Marshall Islands have joined the dispute by renewing their claim to Wake Island.

Midway, Johnston, Wake, Jarvis, Howland and Baker are all arid atolls, with very low rainfall (average annual rainfall on Johnston, 663 mm). The islands are covered with low grasses and sparse shrubs, and lack fresh water. Palmyra has a wet climate, with an average annual rainfall of about 5,100 mm per year, and is the only "wet" atoll under U.S. jurisdiction. The vegetation is very lush, with coconut palms, several species of ferns and two species of trees, but the islands lack permanent fresh water. Midway, Johnston, Wake, Jarvis, Howland, Baker and Palmyra all support large breeding colonies of sea-birds. Green Turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) nest in large numbers on Midway, and occur regularly in the seas around the other islands. The Hawaiian Monk Seal (*Monachus schauinslandi*) remains common on Midway, and is an occasional visitor to Johnston Atoll (IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988).

Midway Atoll was notified as a National Wildlife Refuge in 1988 (IUCN, 1991). Prior to that, the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service had assisted in the management of wildlife under a memorandum of agreement with the U.S. Navy. Johnston was declared a bird refuge in 1926 under Presidential Executive Order, and later upgraded to National Wildlife Refuge. At Wake Atoll, Air Force regulations have designated important sea-bird nesting areas as refuges. Jarvis, Howland and Baker were declared National Wildlife Refuges in 1974, and are under the jurisdiction of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. The refuges are administered by the Hawaiian Islands and Pacific Islands National Wildlife Refuge Complex in Honolulu (IUCN, 1991; UNEP/IUCN, 1988). Kingman Reef and Palmyra are unprotected. Hay (1985) has suggested that Palmyra would be a suitable site for a reserve, perhaps under a non-governmental organization such as The Nature Conservancy.

Summary of Wetland Situation

There is no natural fresh water on any of the islands, and it seems that there are no true wetlands.

WETLANDS

None.

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