**Pacific Ocean stewards**

Susana Waqainabete-tuisese

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Last month, Mexico and the United States experienced yet another devastating hurricane. In 12 hours, Hurricane Milton went from a Category 1 to a Category 5 storm – the most extreme level there is. How?

Sustained ocean warming, due to human-caused climate change, is creating so much ocean energy that storms are happening faster, and at much higher intensities, causing billion-dollar hurricane events as frequently as every few weeks. The oceans, which cover more than 70 percent of the Earth’s surface, are rapidly changing – with devastating consequences for global economies, coastal communities, and the lives of millions of people.

In the Pacific Islands – my home – this reality is felt especially hard on an annual basis. Despite this region contributing the least to global emissions driving climate and ocean change, we are among the most impacted by human-altered climate.

Sea-surface temperatures in the southwest Pacific have risen three times faster than the global average, with marine heatwaves doubling in frequency, intensity, and duration since 1980.

Rising sea levels are eroding our land and pushing the ocean into our homes. Climate change is also affecting fisheries, which are a major source of income for our nations. The sustainable industrial fisheries in the western and central Pacific Ocean, which provide over half of the world’s tuna catch, are starting to collapse as tuna populations are moving east.

This could lead to losses of fishing access fees of up to $140m annually by 2050, robbing Pacific economies of up to 17 percent of their annual government revenue, pushing already vulnerable economies to the brink.

But the impact of climate change on the Pacific Ocean is not just concerning to its inhabitants. The world’s oceans absorb a third of the planet’s atmospheric carbon, so like the Amazon, the largest forest and lungs of the planet, the Pacific – the largest and deepest ocean – should also be understood to be the lungs of our blue planet.

The urgency is undeniable: without immediate intervention, the Pacific will face an ecological and economic catastrophe in the next 30 to 40 years.

In the face of these growing challenges and threats, Pacific Islanders are not waiting for the world to act. Instead, we are leading. Often referred to as “small island developing states (SIDS)”, we know ourselves to be “large ocean states”. We are stewards of half of the world’s ocean and care deeply about our marine ecosystems – they are connected to our way of life.

That is why we have embraced marine protected areas (MPAs). They replenish fish stocks, support local economies, and protect biodiversity. Pacific peoples have known this for generations. Indigenous traditions of marine protections date back millennia, from Fiji to Samoa, Aotearoa New Zealand, Tahiti, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, Papua New Guinea and Hawaii.

MPAs create a “spillover” effect, where fish stocks in protected areas help increase catches in nearby areas, benefiting both local fishers and the broader economy. Recent global studies of over 50 MPAs in more than 30 countries have shown that marine protections can boost both fishing and tourism revenues.

In some cases, profits have reached billions of dollars, proof that conservation and economic growth can go together. It is undeniable that it is in society’s enlightened self-interest to support the creation of protected areas to sustain marine life, local livelihoods and economic interests.

The people of Samoa reaffirmed this belief by launching a Marine Spatial Plan on October 24. The plan aims to protect 30 percent of their ocean space by 2030 while ensuring sustainable management of the entire 120,000-square-kilometre (46,300-square-mile) area.

This ambitious strategy, built through extensive consultation with the Samoan people, reflects their commitment to balancing conservation, livelihoods, and economic development and is a key part of their national ocean strategy policy framework.

The plan will establish nine new fully protected MPAs while incorporating a network of community-led marine-managed areas and traditional fisheries reserves. This initiative will safeguard Samoa’s ocean for future generations while allowing for sustainable activities like fishing and tourism.

Ocean management in the Pacific embraces cultural principles of Indigenous communities based on values of respect for others, devotion to family and deep appreciation for traditional stewardship in preserving natural resources for future benefits. Sustainable financing of such integrated systems is critical to ensure lasting impact.

Across the Pacific, countries like Niue, Fiji, and the Solomon Islands are also championing traditional ocean management practices, proving that Indigenous knowledge is vital to sustaining the health of our oceans.

Excerpted: ‘It is time to support Pacific Ocean stewards’. Courtesy: Aljazeera.com