

Chris Jordan, Photographic Artist
Oversight Hearing on the Management of the Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge
Thursday, November 20, 2014, 10:00 a.m.

Dear members of the Subcommittee on Fisheries, Wildlife, Oceans and Insular Affairs,

My name is Chris Jordan, and I am a photographic artist from Seattle. I have presented my work at schools, universities, conferences and gatherings around the globe, and my images are published and exhibited worldwide.

I have had the privilege of visiting Midway Atoll National Wildlife Refuge eight times over the last few years, as I worked on an intensive photographing and filming project about the albatrosses that live on the island.

My film is not yet finished, but my 4-minute trailer has reached more than 15 million people in 154 countries around the world. My photographs of albatrosses filled with plastic have reached a global audience of hundreds of millions of viewers.

I first went to Midway to photograph the tragedy of the birds filled with plastic. Nowhere else is the global crisis of ocean plastic pollution more powerfully evident than on Midway. Unfortunately there is nothing that can be done on a local level to solve this tragedy. The parent albatrosses range over the entire Pacific in search of food for their babies, and it is impossible to clean up such a giant body of water. And even if it could be cleaned up, plastic continues to pour in from our polluted rivers, and it is also dumped overboard from boats of all kinds. In this way, the dead birds on Midway serve as a powerful symbol, like the Earth's alarm system going off, an urgent call for humans to change our consumptive behavior.

But I discovered early on that the plastic issue is just one small piece of Midway's remarkable story. This is one of the very few wildlife habitats on the planet where there has never been a natural predator. Consequently, the birds on Midway have no fear of humans. The albatrosses, petrels, fairy terns, and other birds, do not fly away from us like they do everywhere else. Albatrosses are as big and magnificent as eagles; imagine walking out into a field of 400,000 of them, and sitting down amongst them, and having crowds of them come up to say hello and nibble on your sleeves. It is like being in a magical fairy land from a childhood dream. This experience is transformational to everyone who visits Midway.

The only other places in the world where this happens is Antarctica, and the Galapagos Islands. The penguins in Antarctica are protected by the icy remoteness of the place, and the Galapagos have been ruined by tourism. My friends who have been there lately say that you get herded down walkways in groups, where you get to look at the animals briefly before being herded to the next point. Midway is truly unique, and I am super stoked that it is held in American hands. We can honor it in our own way, as one of the richest and most amazing wildlife habitats on Earth, to be held and protected with our

deepest love and reverence.

It feels important to recognize that this island was the home of these creatures long before it was named Midway, before words even existed, before the first humans walked the Earth. For 4 million years the magnificent albatrosses have been dancing their dances and hatching their babies on this remote patch of sand in the heart of the world's greatest ocean.

During my project I have become closely acquainted with the US Fish & Wildlife Service biologists who run the island, and they have shared with me many of the issues and challenges they face as Midway's stewards.

They are smart and capable people who taught me so much about the islands, it's human history - including the Battle of Midway, and it's history as a military base turned refuge. But foremost they taught me about the delicate ecosystem and the special care needed to ensure the safety of the fragile home of more than 3 million birds. I saw how they manage everything with an eye toward preserving and expanding the habitat of the albatrosses, petrels, frigate birds, fairy terns, the endangered turtles, monk seals, manta rays, and countless other creatures. Their work is aimed at preserving life and its diversity, minimizing the human footprint by controlling invasive plants that entangle or suffocate nesting birds; and removing invasive trees that snag and hang albatrosses as they try to fly. I have seen FWS tackle challenging projects to remove the dangerous and rickety old military buildings that leach lead into the soils and emit asbestos dust into the air.

I have watched FWS slowly shape Midway into a one-of-a-kind living monument. New grass grows up through the old unused runways, and where there were once roads and concrete foundations and crumbling fuel tanks, now there are baby albatrosses in their nests on the newly-restored sand. What more beautiful and effective monument could there be to the outcome of a world war, than a perpetual sanctuary of life in the very location where one of its greatest battles took place?

I believe Midway is best served by having FWS continue managing the island, with adequate funding for a limited visitor program. I believe people should be able to visit Midway, but only under strictly controlled conditions that are not decided in the context of a for-profit business.

Midway is not a place for jet skis and sunbathers and sports fishing boats. It is one of the most special places on our planet. It is one spot on the globe where the first priority should be the protection and safety of the wild creatures that make this remote island their home.

Thank you.