2024 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards
Natural Resources Conservation, Individual/Team Award

Each year since 1962, the Secretary of Defense has honored installations, teams, and individuals for outstanding achievements in Department of Defense (DoD) environmental programs. These accomplishments include outstanding conservation activities, innovative environmental practices, and partnerships that improve quality of life and promote efficiencies without compromising DoD's mission success. The 2024 Secretary of Defense Environmental Awards cycle encompasses an achievement period from October 1, 2021, through September 30, 2023 (Fiscal Years [FY] 2022-2023). A diverse panel of 48 judges with relevant expertise representing Federal and state agencies, academia, and the private sector evaluated all nominees to select 1 winner for each of the 9 categories. These nine categories cover six subject areas including natural resources conservation, environmental quality, sustainability, environmental restoration, cultural resources management, and environmental excellence in weapon systems acquisition.

About the Natural Resources Conservation, Individual/Team Award

The Natural Resources Conservation, Individual/Team award recognizes efforts to promote the conservation of natural resources, including the identification, protection, and restoration of biological resources and habitats; the sound management and use of the land and waters and their resources; support of the military readiness mission; and the promotion of innovative ecosystem management perspectives. Efforts may include engaging in proactive, collaborative conservation efforts to protect threatened, endangered, and at-risk species and their habitats; reducing bird/wildlife aircraft strike hazard incidents; managing proactively to reduce wildfire risks; reducing and eradicating invasive species; and making landscapes more resilient to ensure access to realistic combat environments while protecting ecosystems and the species that live there. The 2024 winner of the Natural Resources Conservation, Individual/Team award is *Mr. Hugo Cobos, Kadena Air Base, Japan.*

About Mr. Hugo Cobos, Kadena Air Base, Japan

Mr. Hugo Alejandro Cobos has been the Natural Resource Program Manager for the 718th Civil Engineering Squadron, Environmental Management Office located on Kadena Air Base (AB), Japan, since 2021. Kadena AB is located on the Japanese island of Okinawa, often referred to as the "Keystone of the Pacific." It is the largest base in the Pacific region at 11,017 acres and is home to the Department of the Air Force's largest combat air wing, the 18th Wing. Kadena AB also oversees all Military Family Housing on the island of Okinawa and has two geographically separated units (GSU), one at Okuma Recreation Center in northern Okinawa and one at Bellows Air Force Station (AFS) in Hawaii, bringing the total acreage to 11,638 acres. Mr. Cobos preserves the rich resources on Kadena AB and its GSUs while supporting the 18th Wing's mission to deliver unmatched combat airpower, provide sovereign options that promote peace and stability in the Asia-Pacific region, ensure the common defense of our allies, and enhance the United States' unparalleled global engagement capability.

Mr. Cobos is the Natural Resources Program Manager for the 18th Wing, covering Kadena AB on Okinawa and Bellows AFS on Hawaii.

Major Accomplishments in FY 2022-2023

- In 2022, Mr. Cobos developed monitoring procedures and projects to protect species at Bellows AFS, including waterbird surveys at wetlands and bat acoustic recordings throughout the station. The surveys identified two endangered species at the station: the Hawaiian stilt and the Hawaiian moorhen. The surveys also identified two Hawaiian stilt nests that successfully produced five surviving chicks. After identifying the nests, Mr. Cobos worked with Bellows AFS staff and the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service to develop Section 7 Conservation Measures, including maintaining a 100-foot distance from the breeding endangered Hawaiian waterbirds for 67 days from the start of incubation.

The Hawaiian stilt is a Federally endangered subspecies of the black-necked stilt found only on the Hawaiian Islands. With habitat loss being its primary cause for decline, restoring wetlands on Bellows AFS has increased their available breeding habitat.

- Mr. Cobos' management of invasive species and coordination with military construction project planners resulted in the preservation of over 230 Japan-protected species on the installation. He contributed to the successful eradication of invasive species, including over 2,700 white-lipped treefrog nests and 1,900 mongooses. In addition, Mr. Cobos identified 831 beetle-infested Ryukyu pine trees, oversaw removal of 310 trees in 2022, and sourced an additional $300,000 to remove the remaining infested trees in 2023.
- Mr. Cobos authored guidance for the installation's Bird/Wildlife Aircraft Strike Hazard Plan to reduce wildlife conflicts with airfield buildings. The guidance provided a design for sliding metal screen doors that allow maintenance crews to keep hangar bay doors open to provide air circulation in the high heat and humidity of Okinawa while keeping birds and wildlife out. The doors will prevent birds and bats from entering and discourage them from hanging around the hangars and flight line. These efforts reduce the chance of a collision and potential health hazards to those working inside the hangars.

The Ryukyu Hawk-Owl is found all over Kadena AB, including hangars on the flightline. Ensuring that they are discouraged from using the hangars protects the listed near-threatened species; personnel working in and around the hangars; and aircraft using the flightlines.

- Mr. Cobos developed a $1.3 million installation-wide Invasive Species Management Plan that included habitat modeling to assess treatment success and guide adaptive management approaches in 2022 and 2023. The habitat model provides information to strategically target locations and specific seasons for treatment to ensure maximum impact.
- Flooding is an issue on Kadena AB due to extensive subtropical storms and typhoons that produce an average of 8.2 inches of rainfall a month during the rainy season. Mr. Cobos advocated for and received a contract totaling $1.5 million for a comprehensive floodplain and stormwater infrastructure assessment for Kadena AB. The assessment included creating a new flood map and identifying the 100- and 500-year floodplains for the installation. No comparable source of flood data for Kadena AB is available.
- Mr. Cobos' photographs have been published in local museum publications. He was featured and given author credit in the Yuntanza Museum journal for identifying the taiga flycatcher, an extremely rare bird sighting for Okinawa. Mr. Cobos regularly contributes information and photos of birds for public display at local museums.