

‘A Force Of Nature’: Wespac’s Kitty Simonds Has Had A Productive Reign

The longtime leader of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council has always done things her own way, for better or for worse.

BY [NATHAN EAGLE](#) / NOVEMBER 7, 2021

She just wants a little credit.

For nearly 40 years, Kitty Simonds has steered a small staff toward a large goal: sustainable management of 1.5 million square miles of ocean around Hawaii, American Samoa, Guam, the Northern Marianas and a handful of remote U.S. islands.



A Civil Beat Investigation

This Civil Beat special report documents the political activism of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council, a federal panel that sets fisheries policies that govern 1.5 million square miles of the Western Pacific Ocean. Federal law generally prohibits using taxpayer dollars to lobby on state and federal issues but Wespac has for decades pushed those rules to the limit, angering environmentalists and Native Hawaiians. Now, with climate change creating a new urgency, Congress may be about to crack down on Wespac.

Part 1: [Records show how Wespac has used its political power to influence state and federal policy for the benefit of the fishing industry.](#)

Part 2: [Council leaders spent heavily to set up a traditional Hawaiian system of resource management even though it infringed on state jurisdiction.](#)

Part 3: [Fighting for the interests of the commercial tuna fleet, Wespac has pressured presidents and orchestrated public opposition to marine monuments.](#)

Part 4: Who is Kitty Simonds? A profile of the council's longtime executive director.

Part 5: [Wespac has long been controlled by fishing interests but this year was forced to accept a conservation-minded member.](#)

Part 6: [A reporting trip to Alaska reveals major differences between Wespac and other regional councils.](#)

Part 7: [A major update of the Magnuson-Stevens Act under consideration by Congress would prohibit lobbying by Wespac.](#)

As executive director of the Western Pacific Regional Fishery Management Council she's been at the center of some of the most important natural resource issues facing Hawaii and the entire Western Pacific. She's perpetually criticized by environmental advocates and some factions of the Native Hawaiian community. But if you're a fisherman — especially a

commercial one — there are few others at the federal level who will fight harder for your interests.

No one has served longer in her position — in either the Western Pacific council, which oversees the nation's largest region, or any of the other seven regional fishery councils. Until 2018, when the Gulf Council hired Carrie Simmons as its new executive director, Simonds was the only woman at the helm in a sea of almost exclusively white men. She's still the only woman of color to do so.

As executive director, Simonds earned a \$196,000 salary in 2020, oversaw a staff of 15 and controlled the council's \$3.75 million budget, records show.

No matter what political side you're on, Simonds has gained an almost larger than life reputation. When "Kitty" is mentioned in the fishing community, in certain government circles, or with many environmental nonprofits, people know exactly who you mean. And they have no shortage of stories about working with her — or against her — as the case may be.

Isaac Harp, who chaired the council's Native and Indigenous rights advisory panel and was a member of its bottomfish and pelagics advisory panels in the 1990s, said Simonds is a professional at what she does, for better or for worse.

"I was blinded by her charm," he said. "But she can be like a sledgehammer as well when she needs to be."

Civil Beat interviewed more than two dozen people who know Simonds, from her early days growing up in Hawaii to her years starting out in D.C. and throughout her unprecedented reign as head of the Honolulu-based Wespac. This included government officials, current and former council members and employees, politicians, lawyers, fishermen and others.

They described Simonds in equal turns as the most transparent person, in the sense of knowing exactly what you're going to get, to the least transparent person, in the sense of largely operating behind the scenes. She's "the fixer," the "great manipulator," "really, really bright," "hilarious" and the "kindest, most socially fun person."

"A lot of people who know her would say she's tough as nails, as passionate as they come, and her work ethic is almost unheard of," said one former Wespac employee. "She can be the most fun boss, and she can be the most

challenging boss because she really expects a high level of performance and accuracy. She's been misunderstood and mischaracterized, and that's been unfortunate to witness."



Wespac's Kitty Simonds has long prioritized the commercial fishing industry over recreational fishing and conservation interests.

Still, very few people were willing to comment publicly for this story. Most were simply afraid of her, fearing either her deep political influence that could come back to hurt them or more direct reprisal.

Former Wespac Chair Jim Cook, who owns several longline tuna boats, first said he would be "glad to help." But then four days later sent a one-sentence email: "I have decided not to comment." He did not respond when asked why.

Tom Nies, executive director of the New England Regional Fishery Management Council, initially said he was too busy to talk. But when told the interview could wait to accommodate his schedule, he quit responding. His secretary, however, inadvertently emailed Civil Beat in a message meant for Nies, saying: "He still wants you!! What did Kitty say?"

When Civil Beat asked Simonds for an interview, she politely declined.

“I am not the story,” Simonds said.

Merging Ancient And Modern

Simonds has said she is driven by a desire to merge two visions of fisheries management, one based on Indigenous traditions and another on western science.

In a foreword to a book on ecosystem-based fisheries management, she wrote that she felt deeply moved by the fishers who are Hawaiian, Samoan, Chamorro and Refaluwasch who struggle to keep their traditions alive. And that she’s worked with scientists who are “boiling down phenomena into mathematical equations” and running complex models to produce the best scientific information available.



A March 17, 1969, Honolulu Advertiser story noted Kitty Simonds joined U.S. Sen. Hiram Fong’s staff.

It’s easy to see how she has a foot in both worlds.

Rose “Kitty” Simonds, now at least in her late 70s, was raised on Maui, one of Eva and Woldemar Muller’s seven children. Her father was a Kamehameha Schools graduate and construction engineer, born in Kona, who died in 1971 at age 58. Her mother, born in Haiku, was a Girl Scout, devout Catholic and active community member who died in 1995.

A feature obituary for Eva Muller in the Honolulu Advertiser described her as “very brave, very adventurous,” adding “that wasn’t appreciated in those days.” The lifelong Republican of Japanese and Hawaiian descent almost won a Territorial House seat in 1956.

Those interviewed said Simonds is in many ways like her mother, an ambitious woman with an unabashed resolve to stand up for those close to her and their interests. And that if her political leanings came from her mother, her management style was developed at her first job outside of Hawaii.



John Simonds, Kitty's husband, reported for Gannett News Service in 1975 on how U.S. Sen. Hiram Fong used his committee's staff, which included Kitty, despite rules against it.

Simonds' career began at the Republican offices of U.S. Sen. Hiram Fong, known as "the Man of the Pacific." He was the first Asian American elected to the U.S. Senate in 1959, the same year Hawaii became a state.

Simonds joined his Washington, D.C., staff as a secretary in 1969. A 1971 Honolulu Advertiser piece by Eddie Sherman notes, "Double duty: Four of Sen. Fong's attractive Washington secretaries — Maile Mossman, Kitty Muller Simonds, Kanoelani O'Connor and Jeanntte Ramos Kinaka — entertain (Haw'n style) at the Congressional Club's 'Sponsor A Wounded Serviceman' luncheon on Capitol Hill March 16th. How many Senators have this kind of talent around?"

During her time with the senator, Simonds had a front-row seat to the creative ways in which the politically powerful can push the limits of their positions to benefit themselves or the interests of those around them.

In the 1970s, the Washington Post reported how the senators had their employees do politically self-serving work for them. As the ranking Republican member of the U.S. Senate Post Office Committee, Fong boosted his office staff by up to 10 employees by utilizing congressional committee workers.



The late Hawaii Sen. Hiram Fong gave Kitty Simonds her start in D.C.

That included Simonds, who was technically a clerical assistant assigned to the Post Office Committee but actually worked on a range of projects in Fong's office. The practice was popular among congressional leaders of both parties, despite their own rules against it.

Fong was open about the role politics played in his decisions, even when contrary to his own stated goals. In 1976, when Simonds was still an aide to Fong, he recommended Hung Wai Ching to serve on the Postal Service board of governors, considered a "political plum" post at the time as it paid \$13,600 a year to attend 12 meetings.

When an Associated Press reporter asked why he recommended Ching, despite championing efforts five years earlier to remove politics from the postal service, Fong said he had known him since high school as a man of integrity who worked hard for the party. "That's politics," he said.

Another reporter who covered the story was John Simonds, Kitty's husband. The couple and their two children lived in D.C. Several years later, John Simonds took a job at the Honolulu Star-Bulletin. He later became the newspaper's executive editor, and the paper regularly included disclaimers about their relationship when it wrote about Wespac.

Leading The Fishery Council

Fong left public life soon after retiring in 1976, leaving Simonds in limbo. Democrat Spark Matsunaga took his place. That same year Congress passed the law creating the regional fishery management councils, which would all soon be hiring.

Hawaii U.S. Sen. Daniel Inouye was heavily involved with that bill, now known as the Magnuson-Stevens Act. A former member of Fong's D.C. staff told Civil Beat that it was Inouye who helped Simonds land a job as a secretary with the newly formed Wespac. She's listed as Wespac's secretary in newspaper archives at least as far back as 1979.



Kitty Simonds, seen here at an environmental conference in 2016, has served as Wespac's executive director since 1983.

But before long, Simonds was the acting executive director and in 1983 got the job permanently. Wilven Van Campen may have been the first to lead Wespac, but Simonds is certainly the longest. She's held the post for the past four decades.

During her early years as the new boss, she worked in tandem with then-state Sen. Wadsworth Yee. The Republican was Fong's nephew-in-law and had chaired the council since its inception.

Simonds often used temporary hires to staff the office, finding people who were loyal, related or politically connected, according to public records and federal audits.

The council hired the daughter of businessman Chinn Ho, for instance, who was chairman of the Star-Bulletin in 1984 when her husband was the paper's executive editor. And it hired others who worked for Fong, like his aide Beth Dupont and Kinau "Dutchi" Saffery, who was related by marriage to Yee, according to newspaper reports.



Republican state Sen. Wadsworth Yee, seen here in a 1977 Honolulu Star-Bulletin photo, worked alongside Kitty Simonds as Wespac's first chair.

Federal auditors criticized her use of temporary hires in a 1986 report but she continued to do so, albeit to a lesser extent.

Simonds gave a job in 2012 to Donna Worthy, her sister's daughter. In 2011, she hired a state legislative staffer, Kahikina Kaawaloa, on a temporary basis to provide weekly reports as bills were moving through the Legislature related to the aha moku system, which [Wespac had spent heavily to support](#).

Former employees describe mixed experiences working with Simonds. Most who have left disgruntled have kept that private but one case went public early in her career.

Jane Nakamura, Simonds' former secretary, filed a \$5 million unlawful termination lawsuit in the 1980s over "unfair treatment, discrimination and favoritism." It was later dismissed, but her brother, attorney Kenneth Nakamura, told the Star-Bulletin in 1986 that Simonds fired her because "she

knew too much ... such as improper dealings of the executive director and the chairman,” particularly around travel expenses.

“You retain your friends and fire your enemies,” he said in the story, adding that he initially refused to talk to the paper because Simonds’ husband was its executive editor.

“She’s a law unto herself, not answerable to anybody.” — Pat Tummons, Environment Hawaii

Some believe that John Simonds’ position minimized coverage of fisheries and the council.

So little was written about the council in the Hawaii media that Pat Tummons, editor of the Environment Hawaii newsletter, made Wespac her unofficial beat starting in the early 1990s. The daily Honolulu papers and TV news stations still don’t cover Wespac with any regularity despite its role in the region.

Environment Hawaii archives are full of stories detailing Simonds’ reign as executive director, ranging from her behavior at council meetings to her political activism on issues affecting fisheries. Tummons frequently battled Simonds for access to public records and to find out details of Wespac’s activities and in particular how it was spending public money.

“I’m just bewildered as to how Kitty has held onto her position for so long,” Tummons told Civil Beat. “She’s a law unto herself, not answerable to anybody.”

Still, Simonds has the reputation of being a fair boss. Former staffers recall a demanding schedule, but being treated well overall.

“Working for the council was like running a marathon with a thorn in your foot,” said Irene Kelly, who worked for eight years with Wespac as its protected species coordinator. She left in 2008 for a job with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

Political Clout

Simonds’ political connections have served her well over the decades. Inouye, who chaired the Senate Appropriations Committee, funneled millions of dollars to Hawaii to prop up its fledgling commercial fishing industry. His

longtime aide, Jennifer Sabas, remains a registered lobbyist for the Hawaii Longline Industry.



The late Sen. Dan Inouye, seen here in a tribute film looming over delegates at the Democratic Party of Hawaii State Convention in 2014, was someone Simonds turned to in D.C. for support.

But Simonds' influence has waned in recent years. She has fewer friends in high places, including in Hawaii's congressional delegation. U.S. Sen. Brian Schatz replaced Inouye after his death in 2012, and his support for conservation issues including marine monuments has put him at odds with Simonds. U.S. Rep. Ed Case is an outspoken critic of Simonds and the council, and along with other congressmen asked the federal Inspector General's Office to [conduct a financial audit of Wespac](#), a probe that is still ongoing.

"Her circle in D.C. is getting smaller," said Moana Bjur, executive director of the [Conservation Council for Hawaii](#). "There's maybe two people left in certain people's offices that will listen to her but the broader group has either retired or gone away. Inouye was one of them, who she could walk right in and get what she wanted."

Simonds has kept the votes on the council she needs to stay in control. Eight of the 13 voting members are nominated by the governors of Hawaii and the three Pacific island territories and appointed by the commerce secretary. She has retained power for so long in large part by convincing the governors to keep her supporters on those lists, according to longtime observers.



McGrew Rice, a Big Island charter boat captain, was nominated to serve another term on Wespac by the governor of the Northern Marianas.

Last year, for instance, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands nominated McGrew Rice, a Hawaii charter boat fisherman, to fill the territory's at-large seat even though he's not from the CNMI. He's a solid supporter of Simonds. During the 2016 debate over the expansion of Papahānaumokuākea Marine National Monument, for instance, he echoed her opposition to the expansion at public meetings from Hawaii to D.C.

Simonds [steers discretionary money back to the territories](#) for fishing projects and keeps the staff and members content with travel perks and good old-fashioned wining and dining, observers said. A Civil Beat database of Wespac's general ledger shows at least \$1.7 million on travel-related expenses since 2010, mostly for meetings throughout the Pacific.

Now, for the first time in years, the council has a member from the environmental community at the table. Matt Ramsey, the Hawaii program director for [Conservation International](#), just began his term and it remains to be seen how strong a voice for environmental concerns he will be.

So far, he is expressing his confidence in Simonds and thinks he will be able to work well with her.

"She's about as transparent as they come," Ramsey told Civil Beat. "She will say what she's thinking. So it's easy to kind of talk with her in that sense. She's also a wealth of knowledge because she has been there for so long. It's very beneficial to our region and to Hawaii because she has such a long history in fisheries management on the council."

Not all council members have approved of her way of doing the council's business and have not hesitated to challenge her. But their tenure is usually short.

Rick Gaffney, a Big Island sports fisherman and former Wespac member, was long frustrated by the council's secretive way of doing business. He was the minority voice, advocating for recreational fishing and the environment. Gaffney cast many of the lone "no" votes before he left the council.

"The bottom line is, it was extremely difficult," Gaffney said in a recent interview, reflecting on his three years with Wespac. "She's a force of nature."



DLNR Director Suzanne Case, center, says she has deep concerns with Kitty Simonds, foreground, interfering in state policy. They are seen here in February 2020 during a congressional listening tour on reauthorizing the Magnuson-Stevens Act.

Suzanne Case, who chairs the Department of Land and Natural Resources and has a designated seat on Wespac by virtue of her position, has long taken issue with Simonds' management, especially when it has overlapped with state jurisdiction.

"I have deep concerns with Kitty's history of interfering with State policy, in a way that is confrontational and divisive," she said in a statement.

Case held up as a recent example Simonds' disregard for Hawaii's input into the 2020 update of the Pacific Remote Islands Areas and Hawaii Marine Conservation Plan. That plan included proposed Wespac-funded projects in state waters involving state-managed fisheries, but it was presented at a Wespac meeting with no input from the state, she said.

"We asked for changes to reflect Hawaii's focus on sustainable ocean resources and transparency, and then worked on changes collaboratively, but the final plan appeared on the next day's agenda for a vote — without most of our changes included at all and without even so much as a markup," Case

said. “It’s a pattern of dismissive, non-transparent, overreach of her jurisdiction.”

One of the sections the state had proposed that was removed from the plan was to improve the transparency and accountability in expenditures from the Sustainable Fisheries Fund. [Civil Beat investigated](#) the secretive fund in 2019, finding lax oversight and conflicts of interest in how the money was spent. Four members of Congress, including U.S. Rep. Ed Case, Suzanne Case’s brother, called for a comprehensive audit of the fund, which the Commerce Department’s Inspector General is currently doing.

The Future

Under fire from Congress and with a Democrat in the White House for the next three years, several people who Civil Beat spoke to say that discussions of Simonds’ retirement have become more prevalent.

During a 2016 meeting of leaders from all eight regional councils, Simonds laughed over some confusion about whether she was retiring that year.

Don McIsaac, then head of Pacific Council and chair of the [Council Coordination Committee](#), had been congratulating Simonds as someone who had been around for the full 40 years of the Magnuson-Stevens Act and that it was going to be an honor to celebrate her achievements.



There's been speculation for years over when or whether Kitty Simonds, seen here during a Wespac meeting in 2019, will retire.

But Simonds said some folks misunderstood his remarks and actually sent her several emails congratulating her on retiring. The first came from an environmental group who had long battled her, especially over marine monuments. She said she had to tell the "The Pew Uncharitable Trusts, sorry, the Pew Charitable Trust" that no, she was not retiring yet, the meeting's minutes show.

"Some people were breaking some champagne about a retirement that they were hoping was going to happen," McIsaac told the Council Coordination Committee. "But we will not see that retirement any time soon, fortunately for the group here."

Others who have followed Simonds' career say she is determined to continue fighting to bolster the commercial fishing industry in the Western Pacific and doesn't want to give up until she accomplishes something as significant as reopening a protected marine area or getting endangered sea turtles removed from federal protection.

The pending update of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, which has a slew of provisions aimed at countering the way she has operated as executive

director, might be another consideration for her. Some of the updates would greatly restrict her access to funding and add new layers of accountability.

William Aila, who had a designated seat on Wespac when he led DLNR, said Simonds is very resilient.

“She believes in her charge,” he said. “Where I disagree is she puts too much emphasis on the harvesting of resources and not enough on the precautionary principle as mandated by MSA.”