

Advocates for Wild, Healthy Oceans

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Statement Before the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy
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I am Roger Rufe, President of The Ocean Conservancy, formerly the Center for Marine Conservation. With more than 900,000 members and volunteers and a 29-year track record, The Ocean Conservancy is a leading advocate for the oceans. Through science-based advocacy, research, and public education, we inform, inspire, and empower people to speak and act for the oceans.

I thank the Commission on Ocean Policy for inviting me to appear before you today. I look forward to testifying on two of the most pressing environmental issues facing our oceans: marine ecosystem protection and ocean governance. I hope this will be the beginning of a continuing dialogue with you over the life of the Commission.

As a commission, you have a unique opportunity to help shape our national ocean policy to move away from a crisis-oriented management approach toward decision-making that is coordinated, adaptive, and comprehensive—an approach that promotes “protection of the marine environment and prevention of marine pollution.” I urge you to not simply acknowledge the myriad problems that exist, but to employ innovative approaches to better manage and conserve our oceans for present and future generations.

For centuries, humanity has viewed the oceans as a vast and resilient realm. We have used the oceans for transportation, for recreation, for extracting fish and mineral resources, and for dumping our garbage and sewage. Because of this focus on utilization over conservation, our oceans show unmistakable signs of abuse and neglect. Overfishing, coastal development, agriculture, aquaculture, mining, shipping, and oil and gas activities threaten ocean habitats and pollute and deplete the seas.

In the 32 years since the Stratton Commission produced its report, “Our Nation and the Sea,” a lot has changed. A number of new laws govern how our oceans are managed, such as the Coastal Zone Management Act and the Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Conservation and Management Act. In some cases, federal agencies that did not even exist when the Stratton Commission completed its work now administer these laws.

Most important, our oceans are under increasing pressure to contribute not only to food supplies, energy, international trade, tourism, and recreation, but also to advances in medicine, science, and technology. An

estimated one out of every six jobs is marine-related, and one third of our Gross National Product is produced in ocean and coastal areas. Yet consider the following:

- numerous species of marine mammals, sea turtles, and sea birds are in danger of extinction;
- only 300 North Atlantic right whales are known to exist;
- we continue to plunder entire fish stocks;
- we lack sufficient data to assess the condition of more than 70 percent of the fish stocks in U.S. waters;
- of the stocks we can assess, more than 40 percent are depleted and/or currently being overfished, including Gulf of Mexico red snapper, Gulf of Maine cod, swordfish, and many shark species.

Scientists have identified fishing as the primary cause of ecosystem change over time. Pollution and poorly managed development are destroying wetlands, mangroves, coral reefs, and other vital habitats. A 1990 report by the U.S. Geological Survey indicates that the lower 48 states have lost an estimated 53 percent—110 million acres—of their original wetlands. In spite of the immense pressures and problems confronting our oceans and the critical importance of this resource, less than one-half of one percent of U.S. waters are now protected as marine sanctuaries.

Marine Ecosystems

To help reverse this decline and restore marine ecosystems, we must take an ecosystem-based approach to conserving and managing our marine resources. Essential to this approach is making better use of marine protected areas, or MPAs. Marine protected areas are not a new idea, but their potential has not been fully realized. A growing body of scientific literature, including recent reports from both the National Center for Ecological Analysis and Synthesis and the National Academy of Sciences, documents the effectiveness of marine reserves to go beyond the typical goal of replenishing fish stocks to conserving and restoring the full range of biodiversity.

MPAs that are closed to all fishing and other extractive uses provide the greatest ecosystem benefits by far. Their closest terrestrial relatives are wilderness areas, which, by law, are to remain “untrammeled by man.” Today, America’s wilderness system includes nearly five percent of all the land in the United States. In comparison, less than one-hundredth of one percent of U.S. waters receive equivalent protection.

The Ocean Conservancy believes that the time has come for a new ocean ethic that ensures that our oceans, and their unique natural resources, receive a level of protection at least comparable to our lands. Ocean wilderness areas will ensure that there are some special places in our seas where present and future generations of Americans can enjoy, explore, and experience natural ocean communities.

So far, there is only one place in America’s oceans protected as true ocean wilderness: The Tortugas Ocean Wilderness Area. This spectacular area, including parts of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary and Dry Tortugas National Park, protects nearly 200 square miles of coral reef habitats from fishing and other extractive activities. The Ocean Conservancy worked closely with local, state, and federal agencies, commercial and recreational fishers, divers, and others to create and build support for establishing this world-class reserve. This first ocean wilderness area was approved just this year by the State of Florida, the National Park Service, the National Marine Sanctuary Program, and the Gulf of Mexico Fisheries Management Council. This unprecedented cooperative effort proves that designating ocean wilderness is possible, and we hope it will set the stage for protecting additional ocean wilderness areas.

Thanks to growing public and bipartisan support and overwhelming scientific evidence showing the benefits of marine protected areas, establishing an effective national system of MPAs is now within reach. I urge the Commission to address this critical need and to make specific recommendations as to how we can best create a national system of marine protected areas. Building on the progress we have made in the Tortugas, the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Coral Reef Ecosystem Reserve, and the existing Marine Protected Areas Executive Order, The Ocean Conservancy recommends:

- (1) amending existing federal and state laws to place an increased emphasis on ecosystem protection;
- (2) enacting new laws to fill gaps in our current MPA system;
- (3) eliminating destructive fishing practices and other resource extraction activities in such reserves; and
- (4) increasing funding for, and research on, MPAs.

To build a national system of MPAs, we will need to adopt a new ethic regarding how we treat our oceans: one that considers commercial interests, but also recognizes the intrinsic value of preserving and restoring entire ecosystems. This new ethic is essential, not only for establishing more effective marine protected areas, but also to end the practice of overfishing one fish stock after another, fundamentally weakening ocean ecosystems and costing millions.

Preserving our terrestrial wilderness areas took visionary leadership on the part of Teddy Roosevelt, Aldo Leopold, and others. It will take the same kind of strong and effective leadership to achieve comparable protection for our oceans.

Ocean Governance

Numerous federal agencies now have jurisdiction over our ocean resources, with different—and at times, conflicting—mandates. This has led to battles among and within agencies over how those resources should be managed. It has also fostered poor management decisions.

Congress has arguably done little to help clarify the situation, enacting a series of federal statutes that vest different federal agencies with responsibility for overseeing specific areas or resource extraction activities. Congress has exacerbated this problem by not providing adequate funding for critical coastal and ocean programs. For example, in FY 01, NOAA received only \$10 million for coastal states and territories (except Alaska) to combat nonpoint source pollution, the number one water quality problem facing the country.

In assessing the magnitude of this problem, evaluating its root causes, and ultimately determining how we can modify our current governance structure to ensure that our ocean resources are better managed, The Ocean Conservancy urges the Commission to think boldly and creatively. For example, should Congress modify its current committee structure to reduce the number of committees with overlapping jurisdictions? My answer would be yes. Should the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration continue to be housed within the U.S. Department of Commerce, or should management and conservation of our ocean resources be vested in an independent agency outside the Department?¹ I think the latter.

In 1969, the Stratton Commission advised the creation of a new, independent agency to coordinate marine-related activities. Although that recommendation eventually led to the creation of NOAA, it was not made an independent agency, but instead was placed in the U.S. Department of Commerce, a department historically focused more on promoting business and trade than advancing science and conservation.

I urge this Commission to take this opportunity to seriously consider the idea of an independent agency that combines responsibilities now splintered among different federal agencies, each of which has its own mandate and often lacks adequate resources to accomplish critical tasks. The Commission would need to

¹ In this context, management structures utilized by other nations, such as Canada or Australia, may suggest valuable ways in which we could improve how we manage our own ocean resources. For example, Canada's Oceans Act granted the Minister of Fisheries and Oceans the authority to establish marine protected areas, promulgate regulations and standards to conserve and protect marine ecosystems, and develop management plans (Canada's "Oceans Act," Chapter 0-2.4 [1996, c. 31]). Australia's ocean policy sets in place a framework for integrated and ecosystem-based planning and management to promote ecologically sustainable development of the oceans, encourage internationally competitive marine industries, and ensure protection of marine biological diversity. It calls for the establishment of a national ocean ministerial board of all the government agencies with jurisdiction over the oceans; a national oceans advisory group of industry, community, and government stakeholders; regional marine plan steering committees; and a national oceans office in Environment Australia ("Australia's Ocean Policy," Commonwealth of Australia, 1998).

carefully consider what elements should be included in such an agency, how it should be structured, and the extent of its authority. Without question, however, the existing structure has proven inadequate to cope with the crises facing our oceans, let alone to implement an ecosystem-based management approach.

As an interim step to establishing an independent agency, I urge you to recommend creating a permanent, cabinet-level interagency oceans advisory council. Such an advisory council would better coordinate management policies among the various federal agencies charged with administering our ocean resources. Further, I encourage the Commission to consider creating an intergovernmental panel on oceans. Modeled after the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, an intergovernmental panel on oceans could regularly assess the status of our oceans, help resolve scientific controversies, and set cooperative research priorities.

Conclusion

Our oceans are in serious trouble. Fortunately, this Commission is in a unique position. It has the distinct opportunity to address the problems facing our oceans, and to fundamentally redefine how we manage, conserve, and relate to our oceans. The Ocean Conservancy believes that the current approach, which focuses on individual species, activities, and areas, is simply inadequate to the task.

The health of our oceans continues to decline. Only a small fraction of our oceans have been permanently and fully protected. Furthermore, our current ocean governance structure is outdated and desperately needs to be overhauled. Only a comprehensive overhaul will reverse current trends and help us to achieve ecosystem-based management.

At the beginning of the last century, President Theodore Roosevelt created a vision and an environmental ethic that laid the foundation for our national parks and national wilderness system. At the beginning of this century, The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has the opportunity to provide a vision and a plan to President Bush that will enable him to take similar bold and visionary action to protect and preserve our oceans. I urge you not to miss this historic opportunity.

Thank you.

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Through science-based advocacy, research, and public education, The Ocean Conservancy informs, inspires, and empowers people to speak and act for the oceans in order to protect ocean ecosystems and conserve the global abundance and diversity of marine wildlife. With more than 900,000 members and volunteers and a 29-year track record, The Ocean Conservancy is headquartered in Washington, DC and operates regional offices in Alaska, California, Florida, and New England; field offices in Santa Barbara and Santa Cruz, CA, the Florida Keys, the U.S. Virgin Islands; and the Office of Pollution Prevention and Monitoring in Virginia Beach, VA.