

Public Comment to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy

Dear Sirs:

I am writing to comment specifically on the subject of fishery conservation and management. My comments reflect my 30-plus years of experience as a commercial fisherman, as a representative of commercial fishermen, as an active participant in the fishery management system, as a life-long student of fishery bio-economics, and as a fishery conservationist.

The creation of the Oceans Commission was accompanied by references to the accomplishments of the Stratton Commission, which issued its landmark report in 1969. In the case of living marine resources, however, it would be difficult to claim that much progress has been made on the implementation of the recommendations contained in "Our Nation and the Sea." One could, in fact, suggest that the "principles of fisheries management" put forth in "Our Nation and the Sea" are just as valid, and just as timely, today as they were in 1969. In particular, the overarching recommendation of the Stratton Commission that "fisheries management have as a major objective production of the largest net economic return consistent with the biological capabilities of the exploited stocks" should be considered for adoption by the Oceans Commission. The same is true of the Stratton Commission's recommendation "to reduce excess fishing effort."

The Oceans Commission should make a clear statement that:

- The widespread failure of our fishery management system to achieve any reasonable set of objectives is the result of ignoring the accumulated body of research and knowledge known as fishery bio-economics. The assumption that improved understanding of the biological sciences related to fisheries will lead to effective fishery management without an equal commitment to economics is false.

The Oceans Commission is in a position to stimulate a quantum leap forward in the management of living marine resources by taking advantage of the research and knowledge concerning fishery management that has been accumulated over the last thirty years. In an attempt to assure more progress in the future than has been made so far on the recommendations cited above, I suggest the following additional recommendation for your consideration:

- Federal and state governments should recognize that effective fishery management involves the regulation of the economic activity of fishing, not the management of fish. As such, the science of fishery economics should be raised to a predominant position in the design of fishery management programs, rather than being used solely as an after-the-fact analytical tool. Expertise in fishery economics should be a required qualification for persons being considered for policy-making positions in the fishery management system.

There is a very clear and simple reason why fishery economists are likely to be more effective as fishery managers than are fishery biologists - a fishery biologist can perform his duties as a biologist without any knowledge of fishery economics, but the reverse is

not true. A fishery economist must have an understanding of fishery population dynamics in order to construct the production functions upon which the science of fishery economics is built. While it is true that some fishery biologists have acquired a working knowledge of fishery economics, they are exceptional in my experience. I attribute the failure of fishery management systems around the world primarily to the preponderance of biologists as fishery managers and their lack of understanding of fishery bio-economics.

“Our Nation and the Sea” does a good job of explaining how the initial success of biologically oriented regulations can encourage unnecessary fishing effort and erode both biological and economic gains. It also points out that “many measures employed in fisheries management...achieve their conservation objectives by increasing the costs of operation and thereby, hopefully, decreasing the incentive to fish.” The report notes the “economic absurdity of deliberately imposing higher costs on the fishing fleets” and the resentments that such regulations provoke. This “economic absurdity” describes the route that U.S. fishery management has followed during the past thirty years, guided by biologists who have no understanding of the fundamental economic principles that determine the effectiveness of fishery regulations.

The development of fishery management systems that conserve fishery resources while achieving sound economic objectives at the same time is the natural province of fishery economists. Research in this area has resulted in the development of new approaches to fishery management that create incentives for fishing businesses to “do the right thing.” Individual transferable quotas (ITQs) have received the most attention as an effective fishery management tool. I am certain that the Oceans Commission will study the issue of transferable fishing rights and I am hopeful that you will recommend the expansion of rights-based fishery management systems.

I would also suggest for your consideration the ideas of Canadian fishery researcher Stratis Gavaris. Mr. Gavaris’ ideas are best expressed in the abstract to his 1996 article in the Canadian Journal of Fisheries titled “Population stewardship rights: decentralized management through explicit accounting of the value of uncaught fish.”

“Fisheries management in Atlantic Canada has typically involved harvest control by a central authority. There is increasing recognition for the merits of enhanced participation by fishers in the decision-making process. To facilitate implementation of decentralized management, a population stewardship rights fishery system is proposed that explicitly recognizes the value of fish remaining in the water, offers a mechanism for partitioning that value among elementary management units (EMUs), and uses established fisheries dynamics for feedback and accountability on the consequences of actions. In a population stewardship rights fishery, the fish stock is partitioned into conceptual population shares that are entrusted to the care of individual or groups of fishers operating under common rules, the EMUs. EMUs are shielded from the consequences of other’s actions by counting the catch by each EMU against their own partial population. Furthermore, EMUs earn a share of recruiting year-classes according to the relative magnitude of the spawning potential of their partial population, which reflects their success at stewardship of the population share entrusted to their care. Portions of recruiting year-classes may be reserved by central authorities to meet conservation objectives if the actions of EMUs threaten the productive capacity of the resource.”

A combination of population stewardship rights and fishery management guided by the science of fishery bio-economics will transform our fisheries from a drain on the treasury to a vibrant contributor to the national economy. This is in keeping with the Stratton Commission's statement that "the goal of domestic fisheries management must be the development of a technically advanced and economically efficient fishing fleet with the minimum number of units required to take the catch over a prolonged period of time." The need to achieve this goal "without seriously dislocating those fishermen who entered the industry in good faith" is even more important now than it was in 1969. Because the inevitable tendency for open-access fisheries to become overcapitalized was not recognized by a biologically oriented fishery management system, excess fishing capacity is more of a problem now than it was when the Stratton Commission first pointed out its dangers. The nature of the overcapitalization problem is still poorly understood by many fishery policy-makers. It needs to be recognized that well-intentioned support for the "fishing industry" often works to the disadvantage of individual fishing businesses. It does not do anyone any good to maintain a bloated fishing fleet.

Because our fisheries will continue to perform poorly in the time that it takes to replace biologically trained fishery managers with more broadly trained professionals, it is imperative that programs be established to provide current fishery managers with a better understanding of the economic underpinnings of effective fishery management. I suggest that the Oceans Commission make a recommendation that:

- The federal government and the states should establish programs through which the science of fishery bio-economics can be infused into the fishery management program through technical assistance, short courses for practicing fishery managers, and other professional improvement opportunities.

I appreciate your consideration of my views and I look forward to your report.

Sincerely,

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