

Comments for the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy  
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In thinking of the enormous scope of the Commission's work, I was reminded of a simple question asked of me recently by a woman in Iowa, whose connection to the oceans was distant but whose understanding of the crisis of our oceans was great – and for me, instructive.

“How are we doing at fixing the oceans?”

This question surprised me; in its context – this woman was living in a small farming community, yet felt connected to our oceans; in its simplicity – could there be a more clear and timely question regarding conservation; and finally, in the hope that it gave me – for this woman understood issues of ocean conservation and wanted to make a difference.

“How are we doing at fixing the oceans?”

My answer had two parts. “Poorly”, I told her in direct response to her question. Then I let her know that, simply by asking the question, she'd given me cause for renewed optimism.

My major point for the Commission today is this: The need for effective, coordinated and aggressive ocean conservation is urgent. And the corollary: People are largely unaware of this urgency. Shedd Aquarium, with its 70-year history in aquatic education, stands ready and eager - along with over 200 other North American zoos and aquariums - to address this urgency and facilitate the educational initiatives that will surely evolve from the Commission's work.

Programs at Shedd Aquarium provide an example of the educational capacity of today's zoos and aquariums. At Shedd, we are addressing conservation education needs through many creative and cooperative ventures. In fact, the primary role that we see for ourselves is education. We have a tremendous opportunity afforded us by virtue of the nearly 2 million visitors that we receive each year. Through engaging onsite programming, dynamic and entertaining exhibits, through publications, websites and other media, we reach people. The Aquarium is a stage for stories about our world's oceans and the animals they support. Once we have our audiences engaged, we guide them toward a new understanding of the importance of these incredible ecosystems. We make them aware of the complexities of the ocean's problems. And, we remind them of the extremely important role that each of them can play in crafting solutions.

The Aquarium believes in teaching by example. Renew the Blue is the name of our internal campaign for operating our business in an environmentally sound manner. Practices go beyond recycling to include programs for composting, water and energy use reduction, and a decrease in the consumption of materials in our restaurants. Such messages are conveyed to our guests, allowing them to take on the responsibility of treading a bit lighter on this planet.

A seafood public awareness campaign at Shedd complements other programs coming on line throughout the country. In partnership with National Audubon Society's Living Oceans program, our Right Bite initiative provides consumers with information about the state of fisheries and the role that each person has in influencing them by making smart choices as consumers. We practice what we preach, serving only Right Bite menu items in our restaurants.

From awareness campaigns, to classroom experiences, to one-on-one interpretation alongside our exhibits, to involvement in field programs, we connect with our guests. Programs take the form of entertainment, story telling, structured courses, field trips and even games. The means and messages are many, but the overarching goal remains clear: to instill understanding, inspire awe and provide people with tools to make a difference. We are proud of programs like our mentoring program, in which we begin with the very youngest conservationists and bring them up through the ranks. From our Tots on Tuesday program to our adult education programs—learning is life long at Shedd.

Our flagship program in conservation is a partnership with Project Seahorse. This collaboration brings biologists, educators and local community members together to advance marine conservation. Using the seahorse as an ambassador, we're able to focus attention on global issues. From resource exploitation to habitat loss to destructive fishing practices, these popular little fish give us an opportunity to discuss a wide array of issues, both here in Chicago and in fishing communities half a world away.

Our work with Project Seahorse is centered in a small fishing community in the central Philippines. There, we helped to develop livelihoods for villagers that offer alternatives to fishing. The result: a line of crafts in gift shops in the U.S. and abroad, and a decreased dependence on the seas as the sole source of income. A win-win outcome, for the community and for the ocean.

Within our aquarium community, this partnership has advanced the care of seahorses and created a network of engaged institutions. In 1998, Shedd hosted a workshop of conservation and aquarium professionals to discuss seahorse management. From this, a network of 82 institutions in 17 countries is now working together to achieve common goals.

The partnership is presented in our award-winning exhibit, *Seahorse Symphony*, where our guests are treated to an amazing display of these animals. For many, it is the first they will learn about these fish. For all, we hope it is just one of many exciting lessons they receive during their visit.

At the end of the day, at Shedd Aquarium we're all teachers. Whether an accountant in our business office, an aquarist caring for animals, or a server in one of our restaurants, each of us sees ourselves in this role and takes teaching on as a personal charge.

As I think of the woman in Iowa and her question, and I think of the incredible potential for teaching that lies in Shedd Aquarium and in our sister institutions around the country, I'm optimistic. There are critical issues at stake. The situation is urgent. But, the solutions are within our grasp.

Staff at Shedd Aquarium applaud the work of this Commission and look forward to helping to advance your goals.