

COMMENTS TO THE US OCEANS COMMISSION - DC MEETING

My name's David Helvarg I'm a journalist, commentator for Marketplace radio and author of the recent book, 'Blue Frontier - Saving America's Living Seas'

In 1890 the U.S. Census declared America's Frontier closed. In 1983 Ronald Reagan, in one of the most significant and least noted acts of his administration, declared a 200 mile Exclusive Economic Zone reaching out from America's shorelines. This 3.4 million square nautical mile area is over six times the size of the Louisiana Purchase, about 30% larger than the Continental United States.

But our last great physical frontier is also facing unprecedented threats and challenges....

53% of Americans now live within 50 miles of the ocean. 17 of the 20 fastest growing counties in America (and 14 of the 20 largest cities) are coastal, with some 2,000 new homes being built here every day. Our coastal zones (excluding Alaska) are three times as densely populated as our interior.

America has lost over 50% of its coastal and saltwater wetlands to development, and over 95% in California. Most of this has occurred since the 1980s. Estuaries, mangroves, seagrass meadows, coral reefs, beaches and barrier islands are all in decline.

Every year oily runoff into US waters from roads, refineries, ships' bilges, off-shore operations, and other sources equals five or six Exxon Valdez oil spills dumped into America's nearshore waters.

Nutrient runoff from farm waste, pesticides and chemicals creates an annual 7,000 square mile dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico, that grew to the size of Connecticut this past summer of 2001. Nationwide, increased harmful algal blooms, stinging jellyfish and Pfiesteria outbreaks, dying corals, and marine mammal die-offs have all been linked to this so-called non-point pollution.

Although going to the beach is the number one outdoor recreational activity for Americans, there were over 11,000 beach closures due to pollution last year, a doubling in the last five years.

Sea-level rise linked to human enhanced climate change and an upswing in historic cycles of Atlantic hurricanes also threaten America's overbuilt shorelines, particularly on the Atlantic Seaboard and along the Gulf. Private insurance pay outs for major weather related damages jumped from \$17 billion in the 1980s to over \$60 billion in the 1990s, mostly due to hurricanes like Andrew, George and Floyd.

Still the greatest public financial exposure, one that also acts as a driver of reckless shoreline development, is ironically the Federal Emergency Management Agency's flood control insurance that has made taxpayers liable for over half a trillion dollars in potential pay outs, about half of that in the low-lying, hurricane prone state of Florida.

The government, through cheap loans and other subsidies also helped create an overcapitalized fishing-fleet that, with Navy originated technologies like sonar and satellite tracking, is now working its way down the food-chain, depleting species of fish and other marine wildlife at a faster rate than they can reproduce.

At the same time we're witnessing a boom of sea-borne commerce, already 97% of all non-NAFTA trade, which, while supercharging the economy, also threatens to overwhelm our ports and coastal transport systems and represents environmental, national security, and other challenges.

As the Navy's interest in littoral or coastal warfare increases in the Post-Cold War Era, it's also finding itself in increasing conflict with other players in maritime transportation, recreation and marine environmental protection, conflicts that for the most part go unresolved.

Unfortunately it's all too easy to run through this litany of problems on our blue frontier - At the same time it's important to remember that times of crisis are also times of opportunity.

We tend to think of America's days of frontier exploration as being behind us, but that's because we tend not to think of the other 71% of our blue planet.

30 years ago the Stratton Commission provided some visionary ideas that resulted in keystone environmental legislation including the Coastal Management Act, Marine Mammal Protection Act and Marine Sanctuaries Act.

Unfortunately the Stratton Commission's main proposal for an independent oceans agency combining the Coast Guard with other marine functions now located in NOAA was never realized due to various short-sighted political interests.

Still the Stratton Commission's timing was impressive. They arrived towards the end of the last great wave of public interest in our ocean frontier, when exploration of inner space competed for the public's imagination with the space race and people followed the exploits of both astronauts and aquanauts

(as well as astronaut turned aquanaut Scott Carpenter). The popular culture was infused with salty entertainment from Jacques Cousteau's films and TV specials to shows like Flipper and Sea Hunt starring Lloyd Bridges, movies like The Endless Summer and the surf music of the Beach Boys, Jan and Dean, and others who played at the siren song of the everlasting sea.

I believe that the next great wave of excitement and public engagement on behalf of our living seas is now underway.

In my travels on, above and below the waters of our blue frontier I've been impressed by the many watermen and women I've met who are finding creative ways to address the many problems and challenges faced by our last great wilderness range.

They lead annual volunteer beach-clean-ups and diver fish counts, have established marine sanctuary citizen-advisory panels, and sailing trips for youths at risk, and marine education programs like the Los Marineros program for grade schoolers in Salinas, California, the high school Mast Academy in Miami, Florida or the Discovery Hall Program for 16,000 students a year at Alabama's Dauphin Island Sea Lab.

They lead sometimes angry environmental protests at public hearings on development and offshore oil, and fun but messy restoration projects that can aid the ocean's healing be they of a muddy duck pond in Rhode Island, a coastal river in Oregon or the Everglades of south Florida. They make up coalitions of fishermen and conservationists, marine scientists, businesspeople and urban planners in the Northwest fighting to restore the iconic wild salmon and protect its damaged habitat from rural Idaho to urban Seattle. They're ordinary people

doing extraordinary things on and along our seas. They're what I call the Seaweed Rebellion.

To connect with these folks and expand their numbers you need to offer a bold vision of ocean governance - people respond to boldness, not tinkering at the margins. Thirty years ago the Stratton Commission recommended combining the Coast Guard, America's Guardians of the Sea, with many of the maritime groups that eventually were folded into what is now NOAA. They proposed an independent ocean agency at the federal level that could work with state and local groups (like today's California Coastal Commission), and citizens throughout the nation.

Such an agency could still prove a useful and valuable tool for expanding public awareness about the value of our seas, our maritime heritage and our blue frontier, while also assuring protection and sustainable use of our greatest natural treasure, our seas. After all, it's not every great nation, founded on a wilderness frontier, that gets a second chance on a wild new frontier.