

The Case for Ocean Wilderness

September 30, 2002

Submitted to U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy by:

- 1) REP America, the national grassroots organization of Republicans for Environmental Protection, a 501-c-4 organization
- 2) REP Environmental Educational Foundation, a 501-c-3 organization

In 1964, a bipartisan majority in Congress passed the Wilderness Act, one of the crowning conservation achievements of the 20th century. Since then, 104 million acres of mountains, forests, deserts, and wetlands have been permanently protected as wilderness.

On the land, wilderness has served as a refuge where, to quote the 1964 Wilderness Act, "the earth and its community of life are untrammelled by man." Wilderness is not a luxury or amenity, but a bedrock necessity for an enlightened civilization. Within wilderness, nature carries out the vital ecological processes upon which humanity depends completely. The beauty and grandeur of wilderness has inspired millions of citizens and connected us with our roots.

The time has come to extend congressionally designated wilderness protection to the marine environment, to "the waters and their communities of life." Less than 1 percent of America's marine waters receive protection equivalent to terrestrial wilderness designation. There are special places in our aquatic heritage that deserve protection equivalent to that given special places in our terrestrial heritage.

Beneath the surface of America's oceans lies a rich array of diverse ecosystems and wildlife. The oceans play a critical role regulating global climate and mediating nutrient and energy cycles. America and other nations depend on seafood that is nurtured by marine ecosystems such as coral reefs, seagrass beds, mangroves, and coastal estuaries.

Marine resources add significant economic benefits to our nation. The total value of marine sport and commercial fisheries is an estimated \$40 billion per year. The proven benefits of marine protected areas in improving the health of economically valuable fisheries and the economies of coastal communities is a strong justification for designating ocean wilderness areas providing similar or stronger levels of protection.

For all the ocean's vastness, the scale of human impact from population growth, habitat alterations, invasive species, pollution, greenhouse gases, and resource extraction is growing to worrisome levels. A national marine conservation strategy is essential, and congressionally designated ocean wilderness must be a critical component of the strategy. Only the clear, unambiguous management direction of congressionally designated wilderness will provide the highest level of protection that is needed for special areas of the nation's waters.

We urge the Commission to recommend that Congress establish a network of ocean wilderness areas preserving representative samples of marine ecosystems in the Pacific, Atlantic, Gulf Coast and Arctic environments, with protections equivalent to the

management directions in the 1964 Wilderness Act. The network should serve as biological refuges where critical ecological processes can take place with minimal human interference.

The establishment of the Tortugas Ecological Reserve off the Florida coast last year can serve as a model for, 1) Identifying marine ecosystems worthy of the highest levels of protection and, 2) Working constructively with interested parties to establish preserves meeting high conservation standards.

Many worthy seascapes merit serious consideration for congressionally designated ocean wilderness. In addition to the Tortugas, these areas include the Channel Islands off California, canyonlands in the Gulf of Maine, and the coral reef reserve established in the northwestern Hawaiian Islands.

Protected areas deliver tangible benefits - healthier, more resilient marine ecosystems that produce more fish, larger fish, and greater varieties of fish.

But there are intangible benefits as well:

Wilderness is part of America's heritage, a defining backdrop for the American character.

Wilderness is a library. Wild lands and waters are vast repositories of knowledge that will help us achieve greater understanding of how nature works and order our affairs with greater wisdom.

Wilderness is an inheritance. The wild is natural capital calling forth stewardship of the energy flows, wild gene pools, and symbioses that make life possible on the only habitable world we know.

Wilderness is a reminder. Humanity arose, evolved, and achieved its unique identity in the wild. Wilderness is a compass that points to our place in the sun-powered community of life that gives us a hospitable climate, oxygen, water, food, medicine, and inspiration.

Wilderness is a trust. Wild lands hold the irreplaceable in reserve and keep options open for the unknowable future.

Wilderness protection is a profound expression of traditional conservative principles - prudence, responsibility, and saving for the future. To us, protecting our American wilderness on land and sea is an act of patriotism.

A few months before leaving office, President Theodore Roosevelt said: "Conservation of our resources is the fundamental question before this nation, and that our first and greatest task is to set our house in order and begin to live within our means." His wise advice is more important now than ever.

Extending congressionally designated wilderness protection to marine waters is critical for ensuring the long-term strength and prosperity of our nation and for leaving a priceless heritage for future generations.

Thank you.

--

Jim DiPeso
Communications Director
REP America, the national grassroots organization of Republicans for environmental protection

Ph: 253-740-2066
Fax: 253-850-0580

E-mail
Internet: dipeso@repamerica.org
Wireless: jimdipeso@myvzw.com

Washington State Office:
325 Washington Ave. S, #206
Kent, WA 98032

National Offices:
3200 Carlisle Blvd. NE, Suite 228
Albuquerque, NM 87110

PO Box 7073
Deerfield, IL 60015

www.repamerica.org