

America's Living Oceans

CHARTING A COURSE FOR SEA CHANGE

A Report to the Nation
Recommendations for a
New Ocean Policy
May 2003



Leon E. Panetta, Chair

Executive Summary

Bocaccio, Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary, California
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America's oceans are in crisis and the stakes could not be higher. More than half the U.S. population lives in coastal counties. The resident population in this area is expected to increase by 25 million people by 2015. More than 180 million people visit the shore for recreation every year.

Though a price tag has never been assigned to our coastal economy, it is clear that it contributes significantly to the nation's overall economic activity. Tens of thousands of jobs in fishing, recreation, and tourism depend on healthy, functioning coastal ecosystems. Now, thousands of jobs and billions of dollars of investment have either been lost or are jeopardized by collapsing fisheries. Pollution and sprawl threaten ocean-related tourism and recreation, far and away the largest component of the coastal economy.

But more than jobs are at stake. All Americans depend on the oceans and affect the oceans, regardless of where they live. Ocean currents circulate the energy and water that regulate the Earth's climate and weather and, thus, affect every aspect of the human experience. Our very dependence on and use of ocean

resources are exposing limits in natural systems once viewed as too vast and inexhaustible to be harmed by human activity. Without reform, our daily actions will increasingly jeopardize a valuable natural resource and an invaluable aspect of our national heritage.

In the midst of crisis, there are expressions of hope and signs of success. Striped bass, severely depleted along our Atlantic shores, made a striking comeback when given a chance. North Atlantic swordfish recently did the same in response to lower catch limits and closed nursery areas. Seabirds, kelp beds, and fish communities returned to the coastal waters off Los Angeles after waste discharges were reduced. Proven, workable solutions to the crisis in our oceans exist but such successes will remain the exception rather than the rule until we chart a new course for ocean management.

THE EVIDENCE

The evidence that our oceans face a greater array of problems than ever before in our nation's history surrounds us. Marine life and vital coastal habitats are straining under the increasing pressure of our use. We have reached a crossroads where the cumulative effect of what we take from, and put into, the ocean substantially reduces the ability of marine ecosystems to produce the economic and ecological goods and services that we desire and need. What we once considered inexhaustible and resilient is, in fact, finite and fragile.

The crisis confronting our oceans has many dimensions.



Fishing figures prominently in the economies of many coastal communities, including Seward, Alaska, where anglers fish for salmon in Resurrection Bay.

Ron Niebrugge/wildnatureimages.com

- Coastal development and associated sprawl destroy and endanger coastal wetlands and estuaries that serve as nurseries for many valuable fishery species. More than 20,000 acres of these sensitive habitats disappear each year. Paved surfaces have created expressways for oil, grease, and toxic pollutants into coastal waters. Every eight months, nearly 11 million gallons of oil run off our streets and driveways into our waters—the equivalent of the *Exxon Valdez* oil spill.
- More than 60 percent of our coastal rivers and bays are moderately to severely degraded by nutrient runoff. This runoff creates harmful algal blooms and leads to the degradation or loss of seagrass and kelp beds as well as coral reefs that are important spawning and nursery grounds for fish. Each summer, nutrient pollution creates a dead zone the size of Massachusetts in the Gulf of Mexico. These types of problems occur in almost every coastal state* and the trends are not favorable. If current practices continue, nitrogen inputs to U.S. coastal waters in 2030 may be as much as 30 percent higher than at present and more than twice what they were in 1960.
- Many ecologically and commercially crucial fish species, including groundfish and salmon populations along the Atlantic and Pacific Coasts, face overfishing and numerous other threats. Thirty percent of the fish populations that have been assessed are



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Nutrient pollution of coastal waters causes excessive algae growth on coral reefs, such as this one off Hawaii. Other major threats to reefs include climate change, overfishing, and sediment runoff resulting from development and agriculture.

- overfished or are being fished unsustainably. An increasing number of these species are being driven toward extinction. Already depleted sea turtle, marine mammal, seabird, and noncommercial fish populations are endangered by incidental capture in fishing gear. Destructive fishing practices are damaging vital habitat upon which fish and other living resources depend. Combined, these aspects of fishing are changing relationships among species in food webs and altering the functioning of marine ecosystems.
- Invasive species are establishing themselves in our coastal waters, often crowding out native species and altering habitat and food webs. More than 175 introduced species thrive in San Francisco Bay alone. Nearly one million Atlantic salmon escaped from farm pens on the western coast of North America in the last 15 years. The species is now successfully

*As used in this report, the terms “state” or “states” mean any or all of the fifty states, the District of Columbia, the Commonwealth of Puerto Rico, the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands, American Samoa, the Virgin Islands, Guam, and any other commonwealth, territory, or possession of the United States.

reproducing in British Columbia rivers and diluting the gene pool of native species by hybridizing with Pacific salmon. New species are regularly finding a home around our coastlines as hitchhikers in ship ballast water or on ship hulls, escapees from fish farms, and even as discarded home aquarium plants and animals. Of the 374 documented invasive species in U.S. waters, 150 have arrived since 1970.

In addition to these varied threats, climate change over the next century is projected to profoundly impact coastal and marine ecosystems. Sea-level rise will gradually inundate highly productive coastal wetlands, estuaries, and mangrove forests. Coral reefs that harbor exceptional biodiversity will likely experience increased bleaching due to higher water temperatures. Changes in ocean and atmospheric circulation attributable to climate change could adversely affect coastal upwelling and productivity and have significant local, regional, and global implications on the distribution and abundance of living marine resources.

These are just some of the signs that our interactions with the oceans are unsustainable. Our activities, from those that release pollutants into rivers and bays to the overfishing of the seas, are altering and threatening the structure and functioning of marine ecosystems—from which all marine life

springs and upon which all living things, including humans, depend.

SEEDS OF CRISIS

The root cause of this crisis is a failure of both perspective and governance. We have failed to conceive of the oceans as our largest public domain, to be managed holistically for the greater public good in perpetuity. Our oceans span nearly 4.5 million square miles,* an area 23 percent larger than the nation’s land area. Similarly, we have only begun to recognize how vital our oceans and coasts are to our economy as well as to the cultural heritage of our nation. Finally, we have come too slowly to recognize the interdependence of land and sea and how easily activities far inland can disrupt the many benefits provided by coastal ecosystems.

The foundation of U.S. ocean policy was laid in a very different context than exists today. The principal laws to protect our coastal zones, endangered marine mammals, ocean waters, and fisheries were enacted 30 years ago, on a crisis-by-crisis, sector-by-sector basis. Much of what exists of an ocean governance system in this country can be traced to recommendations of the Stratton Commission—the nation’s first review of ocean policy in 1969. Driven by the need to ensure the “full and wise use of the marine environment,” Stratton focused on oceans as a frontier with vast resources, and largely rec-

*This is the approximate area (in square statute miles) of the United States Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—the area of the oceans over which the United States exercises exclusive environmental and economic jurisdiction. The U.S. EEZ was established by Presidential Proclamation in 1983. The establishment of an EEZ extending 200 nautical miles from the shoreline of a coastal nation is recognized and accepted under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.



Commissioners tour a cannery in Kodiak, Alaska, home port for more than 700 trawl, longline, and crab vessels.

ommended policies to coordinate the development of ocean resources.

Reflecting the understanding and values of this earlier era, we have continued to approach our oceans with a frontier mentality. The result is a hodgepodge of ocean laws and programs that do not provide unified, clearly stated goals and measurable objectives. Authority over marine resources is fragmented geographically and institutionally. Principles of ecosystem health and integrity, sustainability, and precaution have been lost in the fray. Furthermore, the nation has substantially underinvested in understanding and managing our oceans. The information we do have in hand is often underutilized. Plagued with systemic problems, U.S. ocean governance is in disarray.

A 30-YEAR REVIEW OF OCEAN POLICY

More than 30 years after the Stratton Commission issued its recommendations, the state of our oceans and coasts is vastly altered. Although some of the problems that were considered 30 years ago remain with us today, new environmental, economic, and policy challenges have emerged. These challenges exceed the capacity of today's governance framework and management regimes.

Our perspective on ocean resources and policy has also changed over 30 years. We are increasingly aware that development activities can change marine environments. We are learning more about complex interactions in marine ecosystems and the need to maintain the diversity and resilience of those complex and adaptive natural systems. Today, there is a

clear sense that we must do a better job of protecting the oceans if we hope to continue to enjoy their benefits.

The Pew Oceans Commission, a bipartisan, independent group of American leaders, was created to chart a new course for the nation's ocean policy. Our mission is to identify policies and practices necessary to restore and protect living marine resources in U.S.

waters and the ocean and coastal habitats on which they depend. The Commission was also charged with raising public awareness of the principal threats to marine biodiversity and of the importance of ocean and coastal resources to the U.S. economy.

The Commission brought together a diverse group of American leaders from the worlds of science, fishing, conservation, government, education, business, and philanthropy. It secured the help of leading scientists to determine priority issues and to write reports summarizing the best scientific information available on those subjects (see list of publications on page 136). The Commission organized into four committees to review the core issues of governance, fishing, pollution, and coastal development. It also investigated marine aquaculture, invasive species, ocean zoning, climate change, science, and education.

Chris Mann/Pew Oceans Commission

For more than two years, the Commission conducted a national dialogue on ocean issues. We convened a series of 15 regional meetings, public hearings, and workshops to listen to those who live and work along the coasts. From Maine to Hawaii, Alaska to the Gulf of Mexico, we spoke with hundreds of citizens, fishermen, scientists, government officials, tourism operators, and business leaders. Commissioners held a series of 12 focus groups with fishermen, including one in Kodiak, Alaska, which is among the nation's oldest and largest fishing communities. Believing that experience is the best teacher, Commissioners went lobster fishing in Maine, toured a pineapple plantation in Hawaii to learn about ways to control polluted runoff, and visited coastal habitat restoration projects in New York and South Carolina.

By speaking with those who live and work along the coasts and around the country, and by collecting the best scientific information available, the Commission learned a great deal about the problems facing our oceans, the consequences to coastal communities and the nation if we fail to act, and actions needed to overcome the crisis facing our oceans. The status quo is unacceptable. Future generations will judge this generation on whether it shoulders its responsibility.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The fundamental conclusion of the Pew Oceans Commission is that this nation needs to ensure healthy, productive, and resilient marine ecosystems for present and future generations. In the long term, economic sustain-

Senator Ernest Hollings (D-SC) welcomes Leon Panetta, Dana Beach of the South Carolina Coastal Conservation League, and Deb Antonini of the Pew Oceans Commission at the release of Mr. Beach's report on coastal sprawl.

ability depends on ecological sustainability.

To achieve and maintain healthy ecosystems requires that we change our perspective and extend an ethic of stewardship and responsibility toward the oceans. Most importantly, we must treat our oceans as a public trust. The oceans are a vast public domain that is vitally important to our environmental and economic security as a nation. The public has entrusted the government with the stewardship of our oceans, and the government should exercise its authority with a broad sense of responsibility toward all citizens and their long-term interests.

These changes in our perspective must be reflected in a reformed U.S. ocean policy. National ocean policy and governance must be realigned to reflect and apply principles of ecosystem health and integrity, sustainability, and precaution. We must redefine our relationship with the ocean to reflect an understanding of the land-sea connection and organize institutions and forums capable of managing on an ecosystem basis. These forums must be accessible, inclusive, and accountable. Decisions should be founded upon the best available science and flow from processes that are equitable, transparent, and collaborative.

To embrace these reforms and achieve our goal, the nation must realize five priority objectives:

1. Declare a principled, unified national ocean policy based on protecting ecosystem health and requiring sustainable use of

ocean resources.

2. Encourage comprehensive and coordinated governance of ocean resources and uses at scales appropriate to the problems to be solved.
 - a. The regional scale of large marine ecosystems is most appropriate for fisheries management and for governance generally.
 - b. Coastal development and pollution control is most appropriately addressed at the watershed level.
3. Restructure fishery management institutions and reorient fisheries policy to protect and sustain the ecosystems on which our fisheries depend.
4. Protect important habitat and manage coastal development to minimize habitat damage and water quality impairment.
5. Control sources of pollution, particularly nutrients, that are harming marine ecosystems.

The Commission recommends the following actions to achieve these objectives.

Governance for Sustainable Seas

1. Enact a National Ocean Policy Act to protect, maintain, and restore the health, integrity, resilience, and productivity of our oceans.
2. Establish regional ocean ecosystem councils to develop and implement enforceable regional ocean governance plans.
3. Establish a national system of fully protected marine reserves.
4. Establish an independent national oceans agency.

5. Establish a permanent federal interagency oceans council.

Restoring America's Fisheries

1. Redefine the principal objective of American marine fishery policy to protect marine ecosystems.
2. Separate conservation and allocation decisions.
3. Implement ecosystem-based planning and marine zoning.
4. Regulate the use of fishing gear that is destructive to marine habitats.
5. Require bycatch monitoring and management plans as a condition of fishing.
6. Require comprehensive access and allocation planning as a condition of fishing.
7. Establish a permanent fishery conservation and management trust fund.

Preserving Our Coasts

1. Develop an action plan to address non-point source pollution and protect water quality on a watershed basis.
2. Identify and protect from development habitat critical for the functioning of coastal ecosystems.
3. Institute effective mechanisms at all levels of government to manage development and minimize its impact on coastal ecosystems.
4. Redirect government programs and subsidies away from harmful coastal development and toward beneficial activities, including restoration.

Cleaning Coastal Waters

1. Revise, strengthen, and expand pollution laws to focus on nonpoint source pollution.

2. Address unabated point sources of pollution, such as concentrated animal feeding operations and cruise ships.
3. Create a flexible framework to address emerging and nontraditional sources of pollution, such as invasive species and noise.
4. Strengthen control over toxic pollution.

Guiding Sustainable Marine Aquaculture

1. Implement a new national marine aquaculture policy based on sound conservation principles and standards.
2. Set a standard, and provide international leadership, for ecologically sound marine aquaculture practices.

Science, Education, and Funding

1. Develop and implement a comprehensive national ocean research and monitoring strategy.
2. Double funding for basic ocean science and research.
3. Improve the use of existing scientific information by creating a mechanism or institution that regularly provides independent scientific oversight of ocean and coastal management.
4. Broaden ocean education and awareness through a commitment to teach and learn about our oceans, at all levels of society.

This nation must decide how it will choose to meet the crisis in our oceans. Fundamentally, this is not a decision about us. It is about our children, and actions we must take to bequeath them thriving oceans and healthy coastlines.

This is our challenge. To meet this challenge, the nation must substantially increase its investment in understanding and managing its oceans. We need a much greater financial commitment to strengthen governance and management infrastructure, to improve our scientific understanding of marine ecosystems and human impacts, and to educate all

Americans about the oceans.

If properly executed, this investment will be paid back manyfold in the form of abundant living ocean resources for centuries ahead. Without this investment, we risk further decline in ocean ecosystem health and serious consequences for human well-being far into the future.



Justin Kenney/Pew Oceans Commission

Commissioner Carlotta Leon Guerrero (above) joined Hawaiian schoolchildren for a taping of KidScience, produced jointly by the Hawaii Department of Education and Hawaii Public Television, during the Commission's visit to Hawaii in February 2001.