

Opening Argument

Ocean Management Report Card Vital Tool For Assessing Progress



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Four years ago, a prestigious pair of national commissions issued reports with comprehensive recommendations for reform of ocean governance. The proposals of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy established by Congress and the Pew Oceans Commission convened by the Pew Charitable Trusts were similar in most respects. The two are now collaborating on a Joint Ocean Commission Initiative to monitor progress in implementing a “coordinated, comprehensive, and coherent national ocean policy” consistent with their recommendations. This initiative is a great way to prevent the two commissions’ proposals from becoming lost at sea — keeping ocean issues in the public eye, grading government performance, and promoting accountability for results.

The joint initiative’s recent U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card rated the federal and state governments’ response in 2004 to the initial reports as an A–, but the 2005 assessment of accomplishments in six categories is full of failing grades. The federal government flunked in providing new funding and international leadership, notably progress on ratification of the Law of the Sea convention. Research,

policy, and education and national governance reform, including strengthening the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, scored D’s. The Bush administration’s support of fisheries reform earned a more respectable C+, while regional and state governance reforms were rated as “promising” and given a B–.

ELI’s Research and Policy staff is applying our law and policy expertise to develop solutions to the threats to marine habitat and biodiversity and ocean-based livelihoods. We divide the threats into two categories: land-based impacts and ocean-use impacts, including threats to marine fisheries. ELI’s own Ocean Program focuses on both types of problems.

Reversing the trend of marine degradation from land-based activities demands much better integration of existing laws and policies. Ecosystem-based management may be one way to foster coordination among the land-based and marine sectors and governing bodies. As a science-based approach, it requires connecting scientific information and assessments with policymakers and stakeholders who can make decisions on management of land-based sources of pollution. As a regional systems approach, it seeks to bring together overlapping political jurisdictions and numerous specialized agencies to protect ocean resources. Most ecosystems are not organized this way. Experimental regional programs like the new Gulf of Mexico Alliance need to be studied as pilot programs with lessons for institution building in other marine ecosystems.

The industrialization of oceans presents the second set of urgent problems. Emerging and expanding ocean uses like liquid natural gas ports; offshore aquaculture; oil rigs-to-reefs projects; and wind, solar, and wave energy developments promise to provide new food and energy sources that may be beneficial and less harmful to the environment. However, they may also harm the marine environment if an effective regulatory framework is not in place. Again, ELI sees a strong need for a governance structure that evaluates

comprehensively potentially competing uses of marine resources in specific regions. Also needed are up-to-date regulations for operation of specific types of facilities and financial responsibility of operators if damage to the marine environment occurs.

Enabling sustainable fisheries is another high priority. Both domestic and international measures to preserve wild fisheries at sustainable levels have been a failure worldwide; approximately 18 percent of fish stocks are over-fished and 10 percent more are severely depleted. Canadian scientists estimate that industrial fishing begun in the 1950s has decimated stocks of the top predator fish like swordfish, marlin, and tuna. Those that are left are one fifth to one half the sizes they used to be. Unless we are prepared to accept farm raised fish as a complete substitute for wild fish and to acquiesce in the pervasive loss of marine resources that this outcome implies, we need to get serious about upgrading fishing regulation and developing innovative ways to enforce the rules.

In 1995, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization adopted a Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and international plans of action to reduce fishing over-capacity, protect seabirds, decrease destruction of sharks for their fins and as bycatch, and clamp down on illegal and unregulated fishing. Nations are called upon to adopt implementing plans. ELI believes we need to define indicators of progress to measure the performance of nations in implementing this code. Teams of citizens and non-governmental organizations should be formed to monitor and evaluate particular nations’ attainment of the goals of their plans.

The Joint Commission’s Report Card on U.S. progress in ocean policy is the type of tool the public needs to translate its desire for recovery of ocean resources into effective advocacy and meaningful reform. The scorecard strategy should be used much more broadly to track environmental improvement and strengthen public and private sector accountability for results.