

An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century

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A commission created
by the U.S. Congress works to
draw a blueprint for a new,
comprehensive, and sustainable
ocean policy.

As the 21st century dawns, the cumulative impacts of human activities threaten the long-term sustainability of the oceans and coasts and our continued use of their invaluable resources. In the United States, we have already depleted some of our major fishery resources, lost treasured recreational areas, and damaged wetlands that help keep our water clean. In many cases we have paid dearly with lost jobs, degraded water quality, increased health care costs, and decreased revenue.

Despite these challenges, the United States and other nations have an unprecedented opportunity. Today, we understand as never before the necessity of treating the Earth, its oceans, and human life as part of a larger, interconnected system. We also have access to advanced technology and timely, high-quality scientific information. And we recognize the cumulative, detrimental impacts wrought by human influences. The stage is set for us to alter our course toward a new vision, one where the ocean is healthy and productive, and our use of marine resources is sustained and economically bountiful.

To achieve these objectives, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy was tasked to establish findings and make recommendations to the president and Congress for a coordinated and comprehensive national ocean policy. The law passed by the Congress specifically charged the commission with developing recommendations on a range of ocean issues, including strategies for a national ocean policy that "...will preserve the role of the United States as a leader in ocean and coastal activities." The president appointed 16 commissioners who represent a broad spectrum of ocean interests. Twelve appointees were drawn from a list of nominees submitted by the leadership of Congress, and four were appointed directly by the president.

A Startling Message

Beginning in September 2001, the commission conducted a series of 15 public meetings and 17 site visits and heard from hundreds of people across the nation—from the Great Lakes, Alaska, the Gulf of Mexico, the Atlantic and Pacific coasts, and the island territories. The commission also heard from international experts who testified on a variety of issues, including the implementation of a global ocean-observing system, the importance of ocean exploration, and the need for additional research on climate variability and predictability.

U.S. and international experts alike emphasized a common theme—major changes are urgently needed in how we manage, protect, and study the oceans, coasts, and marine resources. The message was startling and urgent.

In the fact-finding phase, we learned firsthand that the nation's existing system of ocean governance does not allow us to manage our precious natural resources adequately for today or for the future. We also learned that U.S. investments in ocean science, technology, and education are insufficient and that our national infrastructure for ocean science and technology is quickly becoming obsolete. The majority of Americans do not understand the importance of the oceans and how their own everyday activities influence the sea. There are growing concerns about science illiteracy and maintaining a sufficient, well-educated, ocean-related workforce in the future. Our hearings also made clear that the time for change is now, while it is still possible to turn the tide, reversing adverse impacts and protecting the ocean's valuable assets for future generations.

The Preliminary Report

The commission's fact-finding and deliberations are now over. We are set to release a preliminary report on April 20, 2004, as part of a two-stage process. In stage one, the report will be available for review and comment by the nation's governors and interested stakeholders. Comments are due by May 21, 2004. An electronic copy of the report and instructions for submitting comments will be available on the commission Website, www.oceancommission.gov.

Stage two begins when the public comment period closes on May 21. After reviewing the comments received from the governors and others, the commission will prepare and deliver a final report to the president and Congress. Within 90 days of receiving the final report, the president must submit to Congress a statement of proposals to implement or respond to the commission's recommendations.

The findings and recommendations of the preliminary report respond to America's cry for action, heard by the commission in talks with so many citizens concerned about the fate of the oceans. The report creates a far-reaching blueprint for change, built on action-oriented recommendations for a new ocean policy that will help ensure sustainable use of the ocean and its resources. The commission is proposing solutions that transcend local and state political boundaries and emphasize the need to move toward an ecosystem-based management approach that accounts for and addresses the interrelationships among all ecosystem components, including humans and other living creatures and the environments in which they live. The plan outlined in the preliminary report will be laid out in nearly 200 recommendations covering a diverse range of topics from governance, science, and education, to fisheries, marine commerce, and emerging offshore uses.

International Initiatives

While national policy is at the center of our report and recommendations, the commission has also taken a strong interest in the international implications of ocean policy. In fact, an entire chapter in the preliminary report is devoted to international ocean issues. In that chapter, the commission says that to influence ocean management globally the United States should start by enacting and enforcing exemplary policies at home. However, coordinated international action will also be required. To this end, the United States must work with other nations and international organizations to develop policies and mechanisms to improve all aspects of ocean governance.

The United States has long been a leader in developing and supporting international initiatives vital to the health of the world's oceans and coasts.

The United States has been engaged with the world community in activities to protect the marine environment, conserve marine mammals, implement responsible fishing practices, preserve coral reefs, and enhance port security. The international chapter of the report finds that the United States can best protect and advance its maritime interests by continuing to engage actively in international policy-making, global scientific initiatives, and programs that build ocean science and management capacity in other nations.

In particular, it is imperative that the United States ratify the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the preeminent legal framework for addressing international ocean issues. (The Bush administration announced its support for UNCLOS ratification on March 23, 2004. The U.S. Senate must still vote for ratification.) Until that step is taken, the United States will not be able to participate directly in the bodies established under the convention that make decisions on issues of importance to all coastal and seafaring nations. Also, while we remain outside the convention, we lack the credibility and position we need to lead in the evolution of ocean law and policy.

The commission took up the issue of accession to UNCLOS at an early stage in its work. At its second meeting in November 2001, the commissioners heard testimony from members of Congress, federal agencies, trade associations, conservation organizations, the scientific community, and coastal states—all of whom supported the ratification of the convention. After reviewing these statements and related information, the commissioners unanimously passed a resolution in support of U.S. accession to UNCLOS. The fact that this resolution was the commission's first policy pronouncement demonstrates the real sense of urgency and importance attached to this issue.

The commission's resolution was forwarded to the president, Congress, the secretaries of state and defense, and other interested parties. The responses were positive. Secretary of State Colin Powell wrote that he shared our views on the importance of the convention, and Admiral Vern Clark, chief of naval operations, stated that he "...strongly believe[d] that acceding to this convention will benefit the

United States by advancing our national security interests and ensuring our continued leadership in the development and interpretation of the law of the sea." Our ensuing public meetings, and the additional information we have gathered, have served to reinforce the commission's conviction that ratification of UNCLOS is very much in the national interest.

The U.S. Role

However, the commission's findings and recommendations in the international area cover much more than the Law of the Sea. In the preliminary report, we lay out a number of "guiding principles." One calls for the United States to "act cooperatively with other nations in developing and implementing international ocean policy, reflecting the deep connections between U.S. interests and the global ocean." This principle is the basis for three areas of emphasis in the international arena.

First, the United States must take a leadership role in effectively shaping, implementing, and enforcing ocean policies developed on the world stage. Next, we must deepen our understanding of the world's oceans and strengthen ocean science partnerships. Third, the United States should increase its commitment to long-term capacity-building in ocean science and management in other nations through funding, education, and training; technical assistance; and the sharing of best practices and management techniques.

Based on these priority areas, the preliminary report addresses the importance of:

- meeting financial commitments associated with the treaty obligations we have accepted;
- enhancing communication, coordination, and collaboration among U.S. government agencies to strengthen U.S. performance at international negotiations and enable the nation to be more influential in shaping and executing world ocean policy;
- finding appropriate global mechanisms to ensure that emerging international ocean-related issues—marine protected areas, the loss of ice

cover in polar regions, and carbon sequestration in the ocean—are addressed in accordance with sound ecosystem-based management principles;

- integrating scientific expertise into the nation's foreign policy process, notably within the Department of State;
- strengthening international scientific partnerships for the purpose of deepening the world's understanding of the oceans.

The broad variety of stakeholders interested in ocean issues may not agree with every recommendation in the preliminary report. Some may think their particular issues did not receive adequate treatment. That is understandable and inevitable, but it should not prevent anyone from supporting the creation of a comprehensive and coordinated national ocean policy. There has been a tremendous national and international focus on marine issues over the past few years and we must not lose that momentum. This is the first opportunity we have had since the 1969 Stratton report¹ to focus national attention on the myriad ocean and coastal issues facing us and to implement a bold, new national

ocean policy that protects and sustains coastal and ocean resources for the benefit of all. The time is now and the opportunity is here—we can make positive and lasting change in how we manage our priceless marine resources. I urge everyone in the ocean community to help us carry this ocean blueprint for the 21st century forward to achieve meaningful change.

1. The Stratton report is formally known as *Our Nation and the Sea: A Plan for National Action*. The report was issued in 1969 by the Commission on Marine Science, Engineering and Resources, chaired by Julius A. Stratton. It is considered the last comprehensive examination of U.S. ocean policy.

James Watkins, chairman of the ocean policy commission, is a retired admiral of the U.S. Navy and the former chief of naval operations under President Ronald Reagan, the former secretary of energy under President George H.W. Bush, and the founder of the Consortium of Oceanographic Research and Education.

The Ocean Commission homepage is located at www.oceancommission.gov.

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