



Cover Story

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PLUNDERING THE PACIFIC

Paul Koberstein

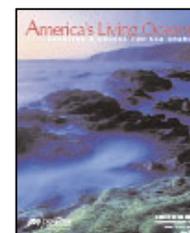
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Science Friction

Science Friction

Industry resists Pew Commission's call for change

Last June, the Pew Oceans Commission released a major report calling for reform of the way fisheries are governed. The prestigious Oceans Commission, made up of environmental, industry, and government representatives called for a new National Oceans Policy and regional ocean ecosystem councils staffed with non-partisan scientists. It would not eliminate federal fishery councils, but would strip them of any responsibility for balancing conservation and economics. Some conservationists would go further than the Oceans Commission and toss the entire fisheries council system overboard, and move NOAA Fisheries out of the Department of Commerce.



The report, "America's Living Oceans: Charting a Course for Sea Change," presented incontrovertible evidence that of 304 managed stocks that have been fully assessed, just under a third are either overfished, experiencing overfishing, or both.

The commission found that after fishers decimate a prized species, they move on to related, but perhaps less valuable, species. When these less valuable species then decline, fishermen move to yet another species and so on. This is a widespread problem occurring among rockfish on the Pacific coast, and contributing to severe declines in crustacean fisheries in the Gulf of Alaska.

The Oceans Commission was not the only source this year of troubling news about the oceans. Last May, the journal Nature revealed that just 10 percent of all large fish – including tuna, swordfish, marlin and the large groundfish such as cod, halibut, skates and flounder – remain alive in the sea. Most strikingly, the study showed that industrial fisheries take only ten to fifteen years to grind any new fish community they encounter to one tenth of what it was before.

The Ocean Commission's findings and recommendations have drawn loud criticism from the fishing industry, which claims it is already making changes. "Pew is attempting to manufacture a crisis to justify its call for a top-down federal bureaucracy and more opportunities for lawsuits," said Rod Moore, executive director of the West Coast Seafood Processors Association, a lobbying group based in Portland. "We have local people responding to problems right now; creating a new Washington, D.C.-based agency and relegating the public to an advisory role will undercut local and regional initiatives that are succeeding. Instead of more lawsuits, let's invest in more science so we can make the right decision."

The National Fisheries Institute, the nation's largest non-profit seafood trade association, said the current system of fisheries councils is, while not perfect, "working remarkably well." The group called the Ocean Commission's idea of a National Oceans Commission "an unnecessary financial and bureaucratic burden to the management of our oceans."

The Oceans Commission was the first comprehensive examination of US Ocean Policy in 30 years. It defined the problems facing the oceans, but also provided a road map for policymakers to restore America's oceans and fisheries. The report notes that rebuilding US fisheries has the potential to "restore and create tens of thousands of family wage jobs and add at least 1.3 billion dollars to the U.S. economy." It cites seven main areas to rebuild America's fisheries:

1. Redefine the Principal Objective of American Marine Fishery Policy to Protect, Maintain and Restore 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.

For a copy of the report, go to www.pewoceans.org.

Paul Koberstein is Editor of the [Cascadia Times](#), where his article, [Plundering the Pacific](#), appeared in Fall 2003.