

# U.S. COMMISSION ON OCEAN POLICY



*Admiral James D. Watkins, U.S. Navy (Ret.)*  
Chairman

The oceans, our coasts and our marine resources are in trouble, perhaps serious trouble. But there are many opportunities to address our current problems with innovative solutions and a coordinated national ocean policy. That is the conclusion of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy's mid-term report. The report, "Developing a National Ocean Policy," delivered on September 16, 2002, to the President and to Congressional leaders, highlights key observations and challenges gleaned from the Commission's six initial public meetings. The publication of that report was a major milestone for the 16-member Commission and a productive first step in our mission to develop a coherent, comprehensive national ocean policy.

Our report is important because it tracks where we have been, what we have heard and where we are going, but it does not contain recommendations. Our final recommendations for a national ocean policy will be presented in June 2003. However, I want to stress that the recommendations alone are not the most important part of our work; rather, it is the implementation of those recommendations that will fundamentally affect our Nation's relationship with the seas.

Therefore, perhaps the most serious challenge of all is whether there is enough will, enough of a sense of urgency, within the halls of Congress, the White House and among the general public to accept, implement and enforce the policies needed to resolve the issues we face and grasp new opportunities as they arise. The Commission thinks so. But, to succeed, we're going to need a "full court press" from all ocean stakeholders. The Commission is counting on that.

So, what does the mid-term report tell us? The report tells us many things. Above all, one common theme emerged from the regional public meetings—our nation's most challenging struggle is balancing the

impact of human activity with the desire to preserve our ocean environment. Invited witnesses and members of the public have testified that marine resources are a critical component of the nation's economic well being. We also have heard, with equal vigor, that these same resources are being put in jeopardy by an array of human activities. We depend on oceans for trade, marine fisheries for food, and marine-related tourism and recreational activities for revenue. With the coastal population on the rise, our increasing impact on coastal and ocean environments is undeniable and, in some cases, severe. We have heard that attempts to resolve user conflicts and strike a balance among interests have had varying degrees of success.

Many witnesses have proposed recommendations for reforming ocean governance. Some call for changes to the existing structure to address both substantive and procedural concerns in policy development. Others have commented on the need to coordinate institutional and individual actions in an effort to address issues at all levels of government. And some have urged governance systems that will allow for a better balance of competing interests to ensure conservation of resources, while at the same time fostering environmentally responsible development and preserving the social and cultural values of those whose livelihood is wrought from the sea.

A number of other recurring points and common ideas also have emerged from our nine regional meetings and the thousands of pages of statements submitted for the record. We heard from over 400 invited experts and members of the public on issues ranging from climate prediction to coastal zone management, from water quality to fisheries management. Other recurring themes include the following:

➤ **Jurisdictional and legal confusion and ambiguity are not uncommon in coastal laws.**

Growing litigation, regulatory confusion and delay, and uncoordinated policy exacerbate conflicts over the use of the oceans. Balancing the economic and ecological health of the oceans is made more difficult in some cases by a lack of coordination; but how can laws and policies be better integrated?

We have received a clear message from managers and other experts that the U.S. is not suffering from a dearth of marine policy laws. The situation is quite the contrary. What is conspicuous by its absence is a mechanism to coordinate the many disparate governance tools to bring ocean resource management within an integrated structure. There is no mistaking that the insular and disjointed approach to policy development of the past has only led to confusion and inefficiencies.

Witnesses have stressed the need for coordination among the many laws and policies that preside over our use and preservation of coastal and ocean resources. Suggestions for realizing such an integrated approach include:

- basing governance structures on ecosystems and using proactive and adaptive management methods;
- developing national ocean stewardship principles and incorporating these principles into the governance structure through public-private partnerships;
- integrating the governmental regime both horizontally and vertically; and
- enabling more consistent participation by regional stakeholders and management experts.

➤ **Ocean pollution is a growing problem.**

Much of it is caused by non-point sources, such as farming practices, urban runoff and air pollution deposition. The sources are numerous and dispersed while the solutions are elusive and challenging. All Americans should be able to enjoy clean and healthy beaches and wholesome seafood; but what can be done?

We have heard a number of statements on, and have received many suggestions concerning, ecosystem health. Presenters have stressed the need for policy changes in order to secure the conservation and preservation of diverse ecosystems capable of supporting diverse uses. Testimony from witnesses has highlighted the damage human activities can cause to our vulnerable and valuable marine resources. Coastal habitats so critical for fisheries and other wildlife are being impacted by development or otherwise transformed. Non-point source pollution from urban, suburban and rural locales is a constant and significant

contributor to water quality decline. Invasive species have become a serious threat, proliferating in ecosystems on all three coastlines and the Great Lakes, often displacing and eliminating native species and altering the biology of existing communities and ecosystems. These are just a few examples of the problems associated with the health of our oceans that have been brought to the attention of the Commission. There are many more.

➤ **Our understanding of the ocean is grossly insufficient to meet societal needs.**

Through greater understanding of the oceans, we can better position ourselves to predict droughts, with their devastating effect on agriculture; hurricanes and storm surges that affect coastal areas; and public health threats now shown to emanate from a warming ocean. With modern technological advances, we have the opportunity to develop truly integrated ocean and coastal observing and prediction systems; but will we seize the opportunity?

Oceanographic data collection provides a wealth of information on the state of the ocean, from temperature and currents to topography and productivity—data that continually enhance our understanding of oceanographic processes and bolster our ability to manage marine resources. Ocean observations are, however, limited in their coverage, both over time and space. We have repeatedly heard testimony advocating the development of an integrated ocean observing system that would allow greater acquisition of and access to oceanographic data in support of, among others, predictive, operational and management needs.

Witnesses have also noted that while the oceanographic community has a great capacity to conduct research, interaction among the various disciplines needs to be enhanced to facilitate a more integrated and comprehensive understanding of the marine environment and the interrelated processes that control it. Toward this end, experts have pointed to the need for a standardized data format to allow for easier exchange, processing and dissemination of information and translation of scientific results into useful products for the user community. We cannot allow data base protectionism to thwart progress. These data are the currency of ocean understanding.

And, despite our intimate connection with the sea, it is estimated that 95 percent of the ocean is unexplored. It is the last frontier on Earth and the potential for discovery is vast. We have heard from witnesses about the importance of exploration in advancing science and contributing to our understanding of this ocean planet. Discoveries made in the past three decades offer exciting economic and scientific

opportunities and speak to the need for continued expeditions in search of the new and unknown. Harnessing the excitement of ocean exploration as a tool to educate students and inform the public could help us take great strides forward in creating an ocean literate populace.

➤ **The depletion of fish stocks continues.**

Marine fishery management has an uneven, and often poor record. Scientific advice has been ignored all too often at the expense of fisheries and the long-term sustainability of the fishing industry. Reform is needed, but what kind?

Ports and marine transportation infrastructure need expansion that is economically and environmentally sound. Over 95 percent of the cargo volume moving into and out of the United States is by ship, and this is expected to double by the year 2020. Our ports and marine transportation infrastructure must have the capacity to handle this increase in a manner that protects and conserves critical coastal and marine resources through environmentally sound planning; but will we be able to establish a process to determine this proper balance?

Particularly important features of our ocean and coastal environment may require special protection for future generations of Americans. Many have stressed the need to protect and restore coral reefs and other ecologically unique and important coastal and estuarine habitats and to preserve marine biodiversity. Protection of these areas requires a more effective and coordinated approach to avoid long-term damage; but will we be able to develop and accept those protections?

➤ **The nature and impact of the interactions and relationships of all Americans with oceans is not fully understood.**

The oceans affect the lives of all Americans—landlocked as well as coastal. In turn, all Americans affect the oceans wherever they may live. What would be a responsible education strategy?

Education experts have testified on the need for effective mechanisms to inform students, teachers, the public, and decision makers on the role and value of our coastal and ocean resources. Given the critical issues I have presented here, it is imperative that we have an ocean-literate public that understands the importance of the oceans and has the basic knowledge needed to make the hard decisions relating to our use of and impact on marine resources. Today's youth will become tomorrow's stewards and leaders, and there is a need to educate these future leaders on ocean issues. Witnesses have commented on a number of

mechanisms to enhance ocean literacy in the K-12 population.

Experts have also noted the need to expand ocean literacy among the general public, a very broad and very diverse audience. All citizens, from those directly involved in marine issues to those who do not even live near the sea, need to have at least a basic understanding of the marine environment and feel a sense of ownership of and responsibility for this environment. Reaching this large audience will require a coordinated and effective mechanism to promote and enhance ocean education, both formal and informal, on a national level.

At this time, the Commission is on the verge of finishing its 11-month fact-finding phase and moving into perhaps the most critical part of its work—the in-depth review and analysis of the volumes of information we have received and the consideration of the most efficient, effective and viable policy options possible. These policy options will be the basis for the final recommendations, agreed upon by the Commission as a whole, to be aired publicly for comment in May 2003 and finally presented to the Congress and the President next June. As part of this policy development process, the Commission held an open meeting in Washington, D.C., in November 2002 to conduct deliberations. More meetings are planned in early 2003. Information on those meetings is available on our web site; the address is noted below.

Overall, the challenges facing the Commission are demanding. How do we improve fisheries management? What can we do to better coordinate marine policy? How do we balance economic and security needs with environmental responsibility? These are a few of the tough questions the Commissioners have been asking themselves, along with the many experts who have appeared before us. But along with these questions, we have heard some answers, some possibilities for how to resolve the many complex and interrelated issues that have been brought to our attention. The Commission is confident that it can offer solutions to many of the critical concerns regarding the proper stewardship of our nation's ocean and coastal resources. ☺

---

*Overall, the challenges facing the Commission are demanding.*

---

**The full report "Developing a National Ocean Policy," and appendices are available on the web site: <http://www.oceancommission.gov>.**