

FOREWORD

This is the fifth edition of *Our Living Oceans*, the report card on the state of the U.S. living marine resources prepared by the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's National Marine Fisheries Service. These reports are neither mandated nor intended to fulfill any legal requirement. Rather, they are written to provide an overview of and a perspective on a very complex subject for the interested reader.

The full set of *Our Living Oceans* spans a period of tremendous change in the management of living marine resources in the United States. Since 1991 when the first edition was published, there have been several profound legal and conceptual changes in the management landscape—notably, major revisions to the Marine Mammal Protection Act (1994) and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (1996). Internationally, the development of the United Nations Treaty on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks and a major new emphasis on the use of a precautionary approach to fishery management have refocused efforts on dealing with the problems of overfishing. These national and international legal changes direct fishery management authorities to implement programs that end overfishing quickly and rebuild overfished resources in a timely manner.

Our marine resource legislation is among the strongest in the world. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act requires strict deadlines for the development of fishery management plans, very conservative management targets, tight timeframes for rebuilding stocks, and consideration of a broader scope of resource issues, ranging from habitat impacts to bycatch, and to impacts on fishing communities. For Federally protected species, similarly strict mandates to rebuild depleted stocks are now in place.

Our Living Oceans 1999 reflects the beginning of implementation of many new management imperatives. Biological populations often respond slowly to management changes. The fishing communities which depend on marine life for food and commerce also need time to adjust to changes in management practices, though in many cases efforts to address overfishing have been underway for many years. Furthermore, as this report clearly shows, the majority of our marine stocks are healthy or at least improving.

Ultimately, it is not just the passage of new laws that will improve the condition of our living marine resources; it is changes on the water that matter most. This report does not tell the American public that the job is done, but that it has begun. Thus it describes our efforts to improve the conservation and management of the Nation's living marine resources so that their full and enormous benefits are available for all Americans.

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PREFACE

When the inaugural edition of *Our Living Oceans* was released in November 1991 it was to be the first in a series of national status reviews prepared by the National Marine Fisheries Service. From the beginning its purpose has been to serve as a report card to the Nation on the biological health of U.S. living marine resources. Subsequent editions have been completed for the 3-year reporting periods ending in 1992, 1993, and 1995. Over time, this reporting effort has evolved to a multi-year cycle to better reflect the extended time period that is often required to observe and document change in the marine environment.

Building on the reception of the biological report card, *Our Living Oceans: The Economic Status of U.S. Fisheries* was released to the American public in December 1996. This companion report defined and characterized economic sustainability

in the Nation's fisheries, and presented a preliminary assessment of their economic health. Work on a third report that will present the initial assessment on the status and health of marine and coastal habitats important to living marine resources is now underway. When *Our Living Oceans: The Status of Habitat for U.S. Living Marine Resources* is released in 2001, the envisioned *Our Living Oceans* series covering stock status, economics, and habitat will be in place.

Our Living Oceans 1999 is the fifth edition on the status of U.S. living marine resources. This report presents new data analyses covering the years 1995–97. On the eve of the 21st Century, it offers a progress report and discusses important issues impacting our living ocean heritage and the challenges that remain.