

## AMERICAN OCEANS CAMPAIGN

*Testimony of Ted Danson, Founding President of American Oceans Campaign before the  
U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy  
Los Angeles, California  
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Good morning and welcome to Southern California. As you have heard yesterday and will hear today, Californians have a deep affinity for our magnificent coastline and oceans -- an affinity shared by concerned Americans across the nation. I wish to thank the Commissioners and staff of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy for inviting me to share some thoughts for a more coordinated, comprehensive national ocean agenda for the 21st Century.

Fifteen years ago, I founded American Oceans Campaign in order to build a stronger voice for protecting oceans and ensuring a healthier planet for our families and ourselves. One of the events that led me to become an ocean advocate was a trip to a local, polluted beach with my two young daughters. Having to explain to my disappointed children that we could not swim in the ocean because we could get sick was an eye-opening experience. Shortly thereafter, I became convinced that dedicating personal time in a campaign to ensure future generations would enjoy healthy oceans, teeming with life, was necessary and important to my family and me.

Throughout AOC's history, we have focused much of our attention on educating the public and encouraging decision-makers to reduce pollution, protect ocean and coastal habitats, and sustainably use the ocean's bounty. On February 28, American Oceans Campaign announced it was joining with Oceana, a new, international ocean conservation organization. Oceana will bring together dedicated people from around the world to build an international movement to save the oceans through public policy advocacy, science and economics, legal action, grassroots mobilization, and public education.

One overarching appeal I have for this Commission is to keep in mind that oceans should be governed for the public trust. With that governing principle, comes a responsibility to ensure oceans are sustainably used and can be fully appreciated by future generations. Unfortunately, so many of our nation's current ocean policies emphasize maximizing the exploitation of ocean resources rather than protecting and restoring ecosystem health. As you proceed with developing recommendations, I encourage you to steer federal ocean policy in the direction of enhanced conservation and protection of the ocean's biodiversity.

A second appeal would be to seriously consider visionary changes to the way we manage oceans. Rather than a crisis-based approach to managing our oceans, we should adopt a proactive, integrated, and adaptive one.

Today, I would like to focus my specific recommendations on curbing water pollution, improving fishing practices, and protecting ocean ecosystems. More specifically, I urge this commission to make recommendations to:

1. Reduce the "polluted runoff" that enters coastal waters from streets, agricultural lands, construction sites, and other sources.
2. Enhance the efforts to control pollution from sewage treatment plants, stormwater systems and industrial plants.
3. Improve and enforce basic fishery management laws so that we protect essential fish habitats, eliminate "overfishing" and stop wasteful bycatch.
4. Undertake a concerted effort to improve basic fish population information so that we make smarter fishery management decisions.
5. Establish a network of marine protected areas that includes a full range of ocean ecosystems.
6. Consider establishing a new cabinet-level department for the oceans that is chartered to protect ocean ecosystems.

### *Restore Water Quality*

The quality of coastal waters is essential to a healthy ocean ecosystem and public health protection. Earlier this month, the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency issued a report on the condition of the nation's coastal waters. Its conclusion was stark. After examining levels of toxins in contaminated fish and sediment, coastal wetland losses, restricted shellfish growing areas and other indicators, the EPA concluded that the overall condition of our nation's bays is only "fair to poor." As the Commission develops its report, I urge you to include strong recommendations to control the pollution that causes coastal water quality impairment.

We must do a better job at reducing pollution from stormwater pipes and "non-point sources" (agricultural operations, marinas, suburban/urban landscapes, construction sites) through enforceable measures such as EPA's total maximum daily load program, the Coastal Nonpoint Pollution Control Program, stormwater management programs, the regulation of large animal feedlots and others. A range of other activities should also be encouraged, such as public education, incentives for land use planning, use of innovative and natural solutions (such as stormwater retention ponds and stream-side buffers), implementation of watershed clean-up plans, and increased funding.

We also need to continue working to ensure we control pollution from sewage treatment plants and industrial facilities. As a first step, enforcement of existing clean water laws needs to be more thorough. We also need to undertake improvements in our aging,

overburdened sanitary sewer systems, in order to prevent malfunctions and backups that cause raw sewage spills in streams, streets, basements, and eventually coastal waters.

We also need to address pollution from ships to control the release of unregulated discharges like "graywater" and ballast water. We need to support additional research to examine new ballast water treatment methods, and equip ships with better treatment technologies to reduce harmful at-sea discharges of sewage and toxic chemicals.

### *Improve Fishing Practices*

Across the world, more than one billion people depend on fish alone for their daily protein. Thus, fishing is an important component to our quality of life on Earth. Unfortunately, the United States and other nations are poorly managing our fisheries. In recent years, fishing disasters have been declared in the New England, Pacific and North Pacific regions of the nation. Recent scientific studies indicate that of all federally managed fish stocks where adequate data exists, 51 percent are "overfished" or "experiencing overfished status" -- meaning that we are removing fish at levels that certain species cannot maintain stable populations. Compounding the overfishing problem worldwide is the fact that 44 million pounds of "wasted catch" - non-targeted wildlife - are annually thrown back overboard, dead or dying.

The Commission should seriously consider the following recommendations to improve fishery management. We should stop the "wasted catch" of fish, sea turtles, corals, and other marine life and the overfishing of depleted fish stocks by improving and enforcing the law; We should restrict the use of the most destructive trawling gears that flatten complex seafloor habitats, like deep-sea corals, sponges, rocky reefs, and boulder fields. The federal government, working more closely with the fishermen and academics, should fund research to develop and introduce fishing gear that is less damaging to ocean habitats and non-targeted wildlife; The U.S. should significantly improve the scientific information about fish populations so that fish management decisions are based on more accurate assessments; and We should promote ecosystem protections as a fundamental part of fishery management so that we stop the practice of managing our oceans as a series of unconnected parts.

### *Protect Ocean Wildlife and Habitats*

The United States enjoys a significant diversity of ocean and coastal ecosystems. These range from the coral reefs of the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands to the Arctic waters off Alaska, from the productive wetlands along the Gulf of Mexico to the deep canyons of the Gulf of Maine. However, there is no overarching framework to protect ocean biodiversity. Many federal agencies and programs oversee certain aspects of the living ocean environment, but none do it comprehensively.

The time is right for the U.S. to adopt a new ethic for the ocean - one that recognizes the intrinsic value of protecting and restoring complete ocean ecosystems. The Commission on Ocean Policy should recommend the establishment of a scientifically based network

of marine protected areas, which would include some areas of the ocean specifically set aside as true wilderness. This network would provide significant benefits, including helping to rebuild depleted fish populations, protecting sensitive habitats, and increasing scientific understanding of ocean ecosystems. I was pleased to hear last spring that the Bush Administration committed itself to implement an Executive Order that calls upon federal agencies to establish a network of marine protected areas. However, since the announcement last spring, there has been little evidence that the Administration is taking significant strides to establish such a system. I encourage the agencies to move forward by convening a balanced group of advisors who are committed to the objectives of the Executive Order so that work on this critical endeavor can begin in earnest. Positive support for this work by the Commission would be helpful.

The Commission should recommend the creation of new ecosystem councils to develop regional ecosystem management plans for the ocean. These scientific and regionally based plans could address a range of problems confronting our ocean and coastal issues that are not being addressed adequately under our present system.

Finally, the Commission should consider calling for a new independent agency or cabinet-level department that is chartered to protect ocean biodiversity. The Commission should challenge the federal government to substantially increase its investments in ocean protection and sustainable management - why not promote a robust Ocean Budget for the 21st Century as we did for space exploration in the 1960s. Even though most of us only get to view the complex web of ocean life at its fringes - at the surface and at the shore -- the oceans are our indispensable life support systems that nourish and inspire us. It is disturbing to witness and learn about our neglect of ecosystems that are essential to our lives. We need to set things straight.

The work of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission comes at a critical time. It has been 30 years since the Stratton Commission issued its groundbreaking recommendations for ocean policy. Current information about the state of oceans and coasts demonstrate that bold steps are desperately needed to rebuild depleted fish populations, clean-up coastal waters, and restore vital ocean habitats. These two Commissions could be this generation's only opportunity to fundamentally improve ocean policy by making conservation a cornerstone. For the sake of future generations who deserve healthy, living oceans I urge you to seize this wonderful opportunity. I thank you for your attention. It has been a privilege to testify before you today. I wish you luck in your important work and encourage you to contact Oceana and other conservation groups for more specific recommendations.