

Testimony before the US Commission on Ocean Policy
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Surfrider Foundation Oregon Chapter would like to thank members of the commission for the opportunity to discuss some recommendations for improving national ocean policy.

During a 1970's press conference, Jacques Cousteau predicted that "within 50 years, the oceans of the world would be dead." A reporter asked him sarcastically, "50 years, aren't you exaggerating?" Cousteau looked him in the eye and asked, "If I am 10, 20 even 50 years off do you get the message?"

We have learned a lot more about our ocean resources, since the 1970's days, but we still lack the knowledge needed to sustain and restore our ocean ecosystems.

What we need is a snapshot, a baseline inventory of the world's oceans today in 2002. We have to acknowledge that this inventory does not suppose that the oceans as we see them are healthy. We urge the commission to recommend additional funding and support for scientific research, and to engage local experts, surfers, ocean recreational users, and fishermen to understand their intimate knowledge of the ocean. Until we have the appropriate science, management decisions need to apply the precautionary principle and be conservative. Think about the long term impacts of each decision.

We need to cultivate an ocean ethic. The threats to our oceans need to be a part of a societal conversation, not a debate about marine reserves or private property rights. We need to converse with our neighbors about our public resources and our common future. We need to conserve our special ocean and coastal places.

Surfers and fishermen have a lot in common. Every morning our first thought is to look at the ocean and answer the question. "Can I go out today?" Hours of our lives are spent observing the ocean learning about the tides, the waves, the changes to our beaches, the taste and clarity of the water, the light in the water, the species that enhance our experience, giving us a glimpse of a world where man can only visit. This local knowledge needs to be recorded and contribute to scientific knowledge that is used to make decisions.

There is a magic in the ocean, an inherent power that runs through each of us. We are all tied to the ocean. Part of creating this ocean ethic will require that this commission recommend that oceanography and ecology be incorporated into K-12 curriculum across the country. We need children in Iowa to understand where sand on the beaches comes from, that fish come from the sea and not the grocery store, and that an orca sits at the top of a very large, complex and threatened ecosystem. We need children and future generations to have the same opportunities to experience the ocean as we have. Better yet, we need to restore our oceans so that they may see and feel what our great grandparents experienced.

This commission must prioritize living and renewable resources over non-renewable resources. We need to make a long term investment in our oceans and establish a networked system of marine protected areas and reserves. Aldo Leopold said it best, "the first sign of intelligent tinkering is to save the all of the parts." We have not done that, we are missing pieces of our ocean ecosystems. The sea otter has been extirpated from Oregon waters since 1906, our kelp forests and beaches are disappearing. We need to maintain healthy linkages between the upland, estuaries, beaches, nearshore and offshore environments.

We need to acknowledge that the oceans are dependent on the beaches and estuaries. The marine environment does not stop at the waters edge.

We would like to see this commission build on our understanding of watersheds and take it to the next step. Take a “Sandshed” approach. While we don’t understand all of the transport mechanisms in our oceans, we do know that sand and sediments move from the mountains, the sea cliffs, and the dunes onto the beaches and all the way offshore. These transport mechanisms are crucial in sustaining healthy beaches. Healthy beaches provide critical spawning habitats for species such as surf smelt and sand lance that are the primary food for salmon, which in turn are the primary food for orcas. Healthy beaches provide economic benefits to tourism by creating recreational opportunities and to upland properties by buffering upland properties from wave attack and other erosion processes. As shore protection structures and bulkheads become increasingly used to protect private property, we need to consider the cumulative impacts of starving the beaches of this critical sand supply. This commission should recommend that each shore protection structure that is permitted has, as a condition of approval for the permit, some means to compensate the public for the loss of sand to the public beach.

It is imperative that this commission consider the entire sandshed and the linkages between each ecosystem that is dependent on the sandshed. We need to measure the health of each linkage to understand where to target our conservation and restoration efforts. One such indicator is water quality.

Water quality is a key indicator for overall ocean ecosystem health. Our members spend a significant amount of time in direct contact with our nearshore waters. We are often the first human indicator of a water quality problem. Currently, Oregon is the only coastal state that does not test any nearshore waters. Oregon and Washington are the only two coastal states that do not have a statewide water quality monitoring programs. Through our volunteer testing program in Oregon, the Blue Water Task Force, we have been testing 6 sites in the Newport area for nearly 3 years. Our tests for fecal coliform have shown high occurrences at both Nye Beach and the Otter Rock Marine Gardens (a marine protected area under the Oregon Territorial Sea Plan). Monitoring water quality helps identify the unhealthy linkages between the coastal uplands, estuaries, and nearshore waters. Surfrider Foundation believes that marine protection must take into account water quality, recognizing that it is not only a key indicator of overall marine ecosystem health, but also of critical importance to human health.

The commission should recommend a research focus on understanding the relationships between pollutants, water quality testing indicators, and human and marine species health. I have had friends get sick from spinal meningitis and hepatitis while surfing in Santa Monica Bay. In Oregon, I have had friends get skin rashes and ear and throat infections, and skin rashes. We need to understand which indicators to test for to identify such waterborne diseases. We need to post those results.

Many of the impacts to our oceans come from pollutants washing off the land. The commission needs to recommend that sections of the Clean Water Act that deal with non point source pollution be significantly strengthened.

The Northwest is an anomaly, the bulk of the population lives not on the coast, but in the central valleys. This has had an interesting social consequence in that the frontier mentality, the hunter-gatherer, self reliant type person is still prevalent in our coastal communities, especially in the winter time. There is still a lot of coastal wilderness, both in the ocean and on the coast. It is a place where restoration can be encouraged just by leaving some areas alone to recover.

The Oregon coast economy is transitioning from a long history of extractive resource use, logging, fishing, and ranching; into an unknown economic future that seems to based primarily on seasonal tourism. This commission needs to support these small coastal communities who have sacrificed their

historic way of life to protect what others have already lost and given up. A recommendation from this commission needs to provide financial support and educational opportunities to help our Northwest coastal communities diversify. Engage recreational users and fishermen in research. Compensate them for sharing their generations of wisdom about our ocean resources. Support and fund state and local efforts to research and manage marine areas.

Many of our coastal communities are facing major problems associated with outdated, antiquated sewer treatment systems and leaky septic tanks. With increasing coastal populations and tourism pressures, these systems are often pushed beyond their capacities even during the dry season. To upgrade this critical infrastructure, bond measures are often put before the voters. If these measures get voted down, the local communities are helplessly trapped between the threat of a lawsuit and the inability to pay for needed improvements. If a lawsuit is successful, then the cost of upgrading the facilities are forced upon communities that often cannot bear the high costs that get passed on for the utilities. It is not a healthy way to have a conversation about our common future and promote an ocean ethic.

There is a famous picture of the earth rising taken from the far side of the moon. It is an inspiring image that shows how tiny and fragile our blue planet is amidst a sea of black outer space. It is debatable whether we know more about the black than the blue. What we need to do is have a conversation with each other about our vision for the future. This commission has a historic opportunity to change the course of ocean policy. We need a bold vision; one that isn't hampered by political ties, but one that lays out a course of action for our future and the future of every living organism on our ocean planet.