NOAA FISHERIES
STRATEGIC PLAN

May 1997

U.S. DEPARTMENT
OF COMMERCE

National Oceanic and
Atmospheric Administration

NOAA Fisheries Mission:

Stewardship of living marine resources for the benefit of the nation through their science-based conservation and management and promotion of the health of their environment

NOAA Fisheries Vision:

NOAA Fisheries envisions a future in which the American people are able to enjoy the wealth and benefits of diverse and self-sustaining living marine resources.

NOAA Fisheries Strategic Goals:

- Sustainable Fisheries
- Recovered Protected Species
- Healthy Living Marine Resource Habitat

NOAA Fisheries National Objectives:

- Maintain healthy stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries
- Eliminate overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries
- Increase long-term economic and social benefits to the nation from living marine resources
- Promote the development of robust and environmentally sound aqua-culture
- Recover and maintain protected species populations
- Reduce conflicts that involve protected species
- Protect, conserve, and restore living marine resource habitat and bio-diversity

NOAA Fisheries Foundations for Stewardship:

- Science which is of the highest quality and which advances our ability to make living marine resource management decisions
- Communication and collaboration with constituents
- Strong and productive partnerships
- Enforcement and regulatory effectiveness
- Agency management, infrastructure, and workforce

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I. MESSAGE FROM NOAA FISHERIES LEADERSHIP

NOAA Fisheries presents this strategic plan outlining our direction and the results we intend to achieve over the next five years. It lays out the goals and objectives that will guide our marine resource management decisions. In the spirit of the Government Performance and Results Act, we have focused on measurable results which are important to the American people, rather than on activities or programs. The public deserves to know not only how we spend the funds they give us, but also what we accomplish with those funds.

We have intentionally set ambitious standards against which our performance can be measured, so that five years from now we will be able to celebrate our accomplishments and learn from our shortcomings. We have committed ourselves to specific results because we believe that we must have a significant impact on living marine resources and their ecosystems. That is what it means to be stewards, and that is what the American people intended when they entrusted us with our stewardship mission.

The construction of this plan has been an exhaustive process, involving employees of NOAA Fisheries at every level, as well as a wide variety of constituents, including commercial and recreational fishermen, other federal agencies, environmental groups, academics, state resource agencies, and representatives of Pacific Islanders and Native American tribes. Now we take it to Congress and the American people for their review and approval.

As an agency, we have derived enormous benefit from this sweeping reassessment of our status and direction, and from consulting with so many diverse interests. We have learned a lot about ourselves, our mission, and our constituents. The next step is to align our budget with our strategic plan, and indeed, this process is already underway. We will soon determine our priorities and allocate our resources according to the goals and objectives set forth in these pages.

We see this strategic plan not just as a document but as the beginning of an ongoing process of learning and improvement which will help us to become better stewards of the resources with which we have been entrusted. The American people deserve no less.

Rolland A. Schmitten

Nancy Foster

II. OUR MISSION

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for the management, conservation, and protection of living marine resources within the United States Exclusive Economic Zone. We also play a support and advisory role in the management of living marine resources in coastal areas under state jurisdiction, provide scientific and policy leadership in the international arena, and implement internationally agreed conservation and management measures. We have defined our mission as follows:

> Stewardship of living marine resources for the benefit of the nation through their science-based conservation and management and promotion of the health of their environment.

This statement expresses our commitment to taking a rational, scientific approach to the difficult, contentious issues of living marine resource management. NOAA Fisheries' aim is to maximize benefits to the Nation from living marine resources without compromising the long-term health of coastal and marine ecosystems. As stewards, we manage for the sustainable use of living marine resources, including both consumptive and nonconsumptive uses, such as fishing, aquaculture, photography and observation. We strive to balance competing public needs and interests in the use and enjoyment of our living marine resources, while preserving their biological integrity.

Management Authority and Legal Mandates. The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, under which fisheries within the 200-mile Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) are regulated, places responsibility for fishery management jointly with the Secretary of Commerce (through NOAA Fisheries) and eight Regional Fishery Management Councils which it established in 1976. Voting members of these Councils represent diverse interests. The majority are appointed by the Secretary of Commerce based on recommendations from the governors of the states in each region; others are members by virtue of their responsibility for fisheries management at the state and federal levels. A number of fisheries based primarily in state waters are managed by Interstate Marine Fisheries Commissions established cooperatively among the relevant states, with support from NOAA Fisheries. The Atlantic Coastal Fisheries Cooperative Management Act and the Atlantic Coast Striped Bass Conservation Act, under which many Atlantic coastal fisheries are managed, provide a special role for the Atlantic States Marine Fisheries Commission in management of certain fisheries in federal waters.

Together, NOAA Fisheries, the Councils, and the Commissions are responsible for preparing Fishery Management Plans (FMP) for the Nation's fishery resources through extensive discussions with states, tribes, other federal agencies, fishers, processors, marketers, public interest groups, universities, and the general public, and through partnerships with international science and management organizations. FMPs for fisheries in the EEZ are developed by the Councils and are approved by the Secretary of Commerce, through NOAA Fisheries. Occasionally, FMPs are developed directly by NOAA Fisheries, with advice and comment from the public, including the Councils. FMPs for coastal migratory fisheries are developed and implemented by states and Interstate Marine Fishery Commissions with support from NOAA Fisheries. We also carry out a variety of statutes which implement international agreements.

Under the Magnuson-Stevens Act, as amended by the Sustainable Fisheries Act, FMPs must contain conservation and management measures which prevent overfishing while achieving, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fish-

ery. These measures must be based on the best scientific information available, consider efficiency, minimize costs, avoid unnecessary duplication, minimize bycatch and the mortality of bycatch, and promote the safety of human life at sea. They must also provide for the sustained participation of fishing communities while minimizing adverse economic impacts on them, to the extent practicable and consistent with conservation aims and requirements. FMPs must also contain provisions to conserve essential fish habitat. This requires NOAA Fisheries to establish guidelines to assist the Councils in the identification and conservation of such habitat, and to consult on all federal or state actions which could have adverse impacts on that habitat.

Under the Endangered Species Act (ESA), NOAA Fisheries, as delegated by the Secretary of Commerce, is responsible for the protection of those marine species listed as threatened or endangered, and for identifying candidate species for such listings. The ESA mandates that we consult with other federal agencies to assess the impacts of actions that may affect listed species, and to minimize those impacts, either through regulation or otherwise. It also mandates conservation of critical habitat for threatened and endangered species. Recovery plans characterize and assess the species' habitat needs, assess the cumulative effects of environmental variability and human-related activities, and include provisions to protect and conserve the habitat. Further, ESA allows us to establish cooperative agreements with states so that they can implement conservation and recovery actions for listed species.

Under the Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA), NOAA Fisheries, as delegated by the Secretary of Commerce, is responsible for protecting certain marine mammals, namely cetaceans and pinnipeds, excluding walruses. We must protect all such cetaceans and pinnipeds, regardless of their population status. The MMPA mandates that by 2001, death of, and serious injury to, marine mammals incidental to commercial fishing operations must be reduced to insignificant levels approaching a zero rate. The MMPA establishes a long-range regime to govern interactions between marine mammals and commercial fisheries which includes the requirement to assess all stocks in U.S. waters, continue the categorization of fisheries and registration of fishers based on their interaction with marine mammals, and implement take reduction plans as needed to achieve the zero mortality requirement.

Various statutes confer on NOAA Fisheries a mandate to reduce and mitigate degradation and loss of living marine resource habitat. These include the Clean Water Act, the Federal Power Act, the Fish and Wildlife Coordination Act, the Oil Pollution Act, and the Coastal Zone Management Act, among others. Under these statutes, NOAA Fisheries plays a primarily advisory role in reviewing proposed projects and other actions which may affect living marine resource habitat, and making recommendations for the adequate conservation of that habitat.

The Stewardship Challenge. Living marine resources currently support extensive commercial, recreational, and subsistence uses. In 1995, commercial landings by U.S. fishers were 9.9 billion pounds valued at a record $3.8 billion. The 1995 U.S. marine recreational finfish catch was an estimated 339.1 million pounds taken on an estimated 65.5 million fishing trips. These are just some of the many benefits Americans derive from living marine resources.

However, many marine species are under stress from overexploitation or habitat degradation, or both. Over one-third of all fish stocks for which we have scientific population information are overutilized, and nearly one-half are below optimal population levels. Some populations of marine mammals, turtles, and fish are in danger of

extinction, and many more are threatened by various human activities. There are many other fish stocks and marine species about which we have little information. Many of these marine species range across wide areas, including state and international boundaries, adding to the difficulty of management and demanding interjurisdictional cooperation.

Many factors, both natural and human-related, affect the status of fish stocks, protected species, and ecosystems. Although we do not have the means to control all of them, our scientific and management tools enable us to have a strong influence on many of them. Maintaining and improving the health and productivity of these species is the heart of our stewardship mission. This will maintain and enhance current and future opportunities for the sustainable use of these resources as well as the health and biodiversity of their ecosystems.

Estimates suggest that seafood production from wild fish stocks will be insufficient to meet growing U.S. and global demand for seafood products in the next century. While maintaining and rebuilding wild stocks remains the heart of our mission, stewardship also demands that we encourage the production of seafood products through environmentally sound aquaculture to help meet this increasing demand.

Carrying out this mission depends upon building strong, effective partnerships with our constituents. All federal agencies are experiencing budgetary constraints and increasing demands, and none can meet all of its mandates on its own. We must collaborate with other organizations with similar mandates to achieve our mutual aims. This includes state, interstate, and other federal agencies, local governments, universities, fishers, environmental and industry groups, sportsmen, Native American tribes, Pacific Islanders, conservation organizations, and many others. We must also increase the reliability of our data, explore new ideas, invest in new technology, and continue our willingness to make difficult resource management decisions.

III. OUR VISION

We envision a future in which:

> The American people are able to enjoy the wealth and benefits of diverse and self-sustaining living marine resources.

In this future, we would see:

- Sound conservation of living marine resources
- Socially and economically viable fisheries
- No human-caused threats to protected species
- Healthy living marine resource habitat
- Credible, high-quality science supporting the NOAA Fisheries mission and minimizing risk in management decision-making
- Trust and respect among all NOAA Fisheries constituents and customers
- Meaningful and effective communication with Councils, state, federal, tribal, trust and international partners
- Leadership supporting U.S. marine resource interests globally
- Use of emerging technologies and products, including environmentally sound aquaculture
- Fair and equitable consideration of all competing users and cultures
- Public confidence in the safety of seafood

This vision guides us in accomplishing our agency mission. Stewardship is more than just better data and more information. As stewards, we have an obligation to conserve, protect, and manage our living marine resources in a way that affords optimal economic opportunities, ensures their continuation as functional components of marine ecosystems, and enhances the quality of life for the American public.

IV. OUR GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

In order to fulfill our stewardship mission, we have defined three broad strategic goals:

- Sustainable Fisheries
- Recovered Protected Species
- Healthy Living Marine Resource Habitat

Sustainable Fisheries. A sustainable fishery is one in which the rate of fishing mortality does not jeopardize the capacity of the stock to produce the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis. By building and maintaining sustainable fisheries, we ensure that fish stocks are available for commercial, recreational, and subsistence uses. To realize this goal, we will:

1. Maintain healthy stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries
2. Eliminate overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries
3. Increase long-term economic and social benefits to the nation from living marine resources
4. Promote the development of robust and environmentally sound aquaculture

Recovered Protected Species. Part of our stewardship responsibility is to ensure that our nation's living marine resources will be protected and enhanced for future generations. Protected species under our jurisdiction include all cetaceans and pinnipeds (excluding walruses) in addition to those marine species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. NOAA Fisheries will provide effective leadership to conserve and recover marine species protected by statute or international treaty through conservation programs that are based on sound scientific research and decision-making. We will also provide for non-consumptive uses of protected resources which are compatible with their long-term conservation. To realize this goal, we will:

5. Recover and maintain protected species populations
6. Reduce conflicts that involve protected species

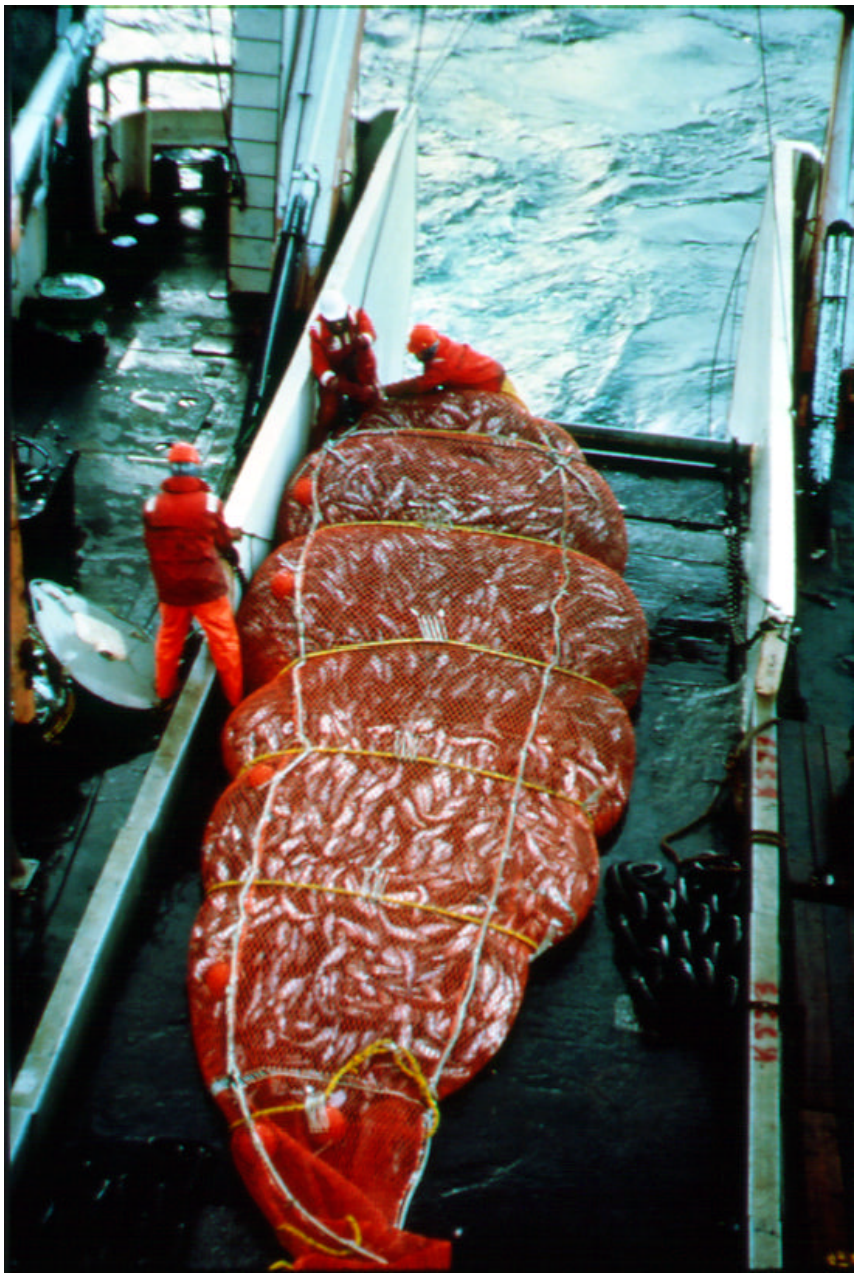
Healthy Living Marine Resource Habitat. All living marine resources are vulnerable to habitat degradation, which can threaten the biodiversity on which they depend. These habitats are at risk from human activities which degrade or destroy habitat quality and quantity. NOAA Fisheries recognizes that wise protection of living marine resource habitat is crucial to the success of management and conservation efforts. To realize this goal, we will:

7. Protect, conserve, and restore living marine resource habitat and biodiversity

V. PRODUCING MEASURABLE RESULTS FOR THE AMERICAN PEOPLE

We at NOAA Fisheries take seriously our stewardship responsibilities and our obligation to use the resources Congress provides us in the most efficient and effective way possible. The American public has a right to hold us accountable and to demand results. Although the conservation and management of living marine resources is often difficult because of uncertainties, uncontrollable events, and insufficient knowledge, we have learned a great deal in our 125-year history of research and management of the nation's living marine resources. We believe we must have a significant impact on maintaining and restoring their health.

Herein we describe our objectives and performance measures, results that citizens can expect to see within 5 years. We have worked collaboratively to produce this plan, involving many of our employees and interested members of the public. The results we describe are important and valuable to the American people, and are achievable in the projected time frame.



sUSTAINABLE FISHERIES OBJECTIVES

Objective 1: Maintain healthy stocks important to commercial, recreational and subsistence fisheries

Managing stocks of fish which are caught for sale, sport, or personal consumption is one of the primary responsibilities of NOAA Fisheries. The aim of NOAA Fisheries management is to maintain these stocks at or above the level that would support the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis. Currently, of the 201 fish stocks managed by NOAA Fisheries, 85 are at or above this level, according to *Our Living Oceans 1995*. However, there are 43 additional stocks for which we do not have scientific population status information. Through scientific and risk-averse management, we will maintain the health of all these fish stock populations.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

1.1 Maintain all stocks known to be healthy at levels that support the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis.

1.2 Reduce the level of uncertainty associated with our estimates of stock status and biological potential below 1996 levels.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 1

1.1.1 We will periodically assess stocks to ascertain whether changes in their status due to natural or human-related causes have occurred. These stock assessments require adequate fishery monitoring and resource surveys.

1.1.2 Using these assessments, we will predict future trends in stock status. Our forecasts will take into account projected biological productivity, as well as economic, market, and social forces that will affect levels of fishing effort.

1.1.3 We will communicate our scientific information and advice, along with the associated uncertainties, to the Councils and other management authorities, and to other interested parties.

1.1.4 We will collaborate with the Councils and other management authorities to develop fishery management regimes that will effectively control exploitation.

1.1.5 We will provide guidelines to assist the Councils in assessing and specifying maximum sustainable yield for managed fisheries.

1.1.6 We will manage stocks of uncertain status in a precautionary manner in response to the level of uncertainty. In fisheries for which scientific information is especially uncertain or lacking entirely, management will be more conservative to avoid accidental overfishing.

1.1.7 We will perform assessments on stocks of uncertain status when such assessments are justified by the potential benefits to be derived from scientific status information.

1.1.8 We will support the efforts of the Interstate Marine Fisheries Commissions to develop and implement effective interstate FMPs.

1.1.9 We will support and implement the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries developed by the Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations, which sets forth principles for responsible global and international fisheries management.

1.2.1 There is a level of uncertainty associated with all stock assessments. We will determine and reduce these levels through improved data collection and advanced analytical techniques.

1.2.2 We will use stock assessment workshops and other forums to ensure that our information and advice are developed through an open and collaborative process.

Objective 2: Eliminate overfishing and rebuild overfished stocks important to commercial, recreational, and subsistence fisheries

Many fish stocks have declined to levels below those which would support the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis. Such declines have many causes, particularly overfishing and habitat degradation. As the carrying capacity of an environment erodes, the fish stocks which inhabit it can no longer support fishing levels which were previously sustainable. Therefore, these are known as overfished stocks, even if habitat degradation rather than fishing effort is the immediate cause of stock decline.

Overfishing is a rate or level of fishing mortality that jeopardizes the capacity of a fishery to produce the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis. As of 1995, there were 73 overutilized stocks under the jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries, according to *Our Living Oceans 1995*. NOAA Fisheries is in the process of compiling a list of fisheries which are classified as overfished according to the Magnuson-Stevens Conservation and Management Act. This list will be published in the fall of 1997.

The Sustainable Fisheries Act mandates strong action against both overfishing and habitat degradation. It contains provisions which require NOAA Fisheries to end overfishing and rebuild all overfished stocks, as well as to conserve essential fish habitat through consultations on federal and state actions which may adversely affect such habitat. These are among our primary stewardship responsibilities.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

2.1 Eliminate overfishing of all currently overfished stocks and prevent overfishing of all stocks approaching an overfished condition.

2.2 Ensure that all overfished stocks are rebuilding to levels which support the maximum sustainable yield according to rebuilding schedules. These schedules will achieve rebuilding in the shortest time possible but not exceeding 10 years, unless the biology of the stock, other environmental conditions, or international agreements dictate otherwise.

2.3 Protect, conserve, and enhance fish habitat which has been identified as essential, to achieve no net loss of such habitats.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 2

2.1.1 NOAA Fisheries, working with the Councils, will develop objective and measurable criteria for each managed stock to determine if the stock is overfished or approaching an overfished condition.

2.1.2 For each stock which is overfished or approaching an overfished condition, we will develop, in collaboration with the Councils, measures to eliminate or prevent the overfishing.

2.2.1 We will develop and implement rebuilding schedules in collaboration with appropriate domestic and international management authorities. As the Sustainable Fisheries Act requires, these schedules will achieve rebuilding in the shortest time possible but not exceeding 10 years, unless the biology of the stock, other environmental conditions, or international agreements dictate otherwise. Existing schedules which do not meet the 10 year requirement will be revised.

2.2.2 We will rebuild stocks through management regimes and regulations which will include reduced levels of exploitation, stock enhancement, habitat improvement, and bycatch reduction where appropriate.

2.2.3 We will ensure compliance with these regimes and regulations by implementing monitoring and enforcement programs.

2.2.4 We will conduct stock assessments in subsequent years to evaluate the response of the stock to the rebuilding measures. We will ensure progress in rebuilding stocks by monitoring the expected improvements in stock status outlined by the interim population targets included in the rebuilding schedules. Rebuilding schedules will be revised as necessary.

2.2.5 We will allocate harvest restrictions and recovery benefits fairly and equitably among all sectors of the fishing community, as mandated by the Sustainable Fisheries Act.

2.3.1 We will establish guidelines to assist the Councils in the description and identification of essential fish habitat, as defined and mandated by the Sustainable Fisheries Act.

2.3.2 We will set forth a schedule for the amendment of FMPs to include these identifications and for the review and updating of such identifications based on new scientific evidence or other relevant information.

2.3.3 We will consult with state and other federal agencies with respect to actions proposed, authorized, funded, or undertaken that may adversely affect any fish habitat identified as essential. This will include recommendations of measures to conserve such habitat.

Objective 3: Increase long-term economic and social benefits to the nation from living marine resources

NOAA Fisheries is charged with managing fisheries to provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation, particularly with respect to food production and recreational opportunities, while taking into account the protection of marine species and ecosystems. We accomplish this through management, to achieve, on a continuing basis, the optimum yield from each fishery. Optimum yield is defined as the amount of fish which will achieve the maximum sustainable yield, as reduced by any relevant economic, social, or ecological factor. In the case of an overfished fishery, optimum yield has been defined as that amount of fish which will provide for rebuilding of the stock to a level which will support the maximum sustainable yield.

Our management decisions must reflect the needs of many different groups, including commercial and recreational fishermen, fishing communities, non-consumptive users, Pacific Islanders, and Native American tribes which have treaties with the United States guaranteeing certain fishing rights which we are obligated to uphold. We must also consider efficiency, minimize costs, avoid unnecessary waste and duplication, and allocate harvest restrictions and recovery benefits fairly among all users, while minimizing adverse economic impacts on fishing communities, consistent with our conservation objectives. To achieve this, we will focus on reducing sources of waste such as overcapitalization and bycatch (all fish harvested but not sold or kept for personal use, including economic and regulatory discards), mitigating the effects of fishery management on fishing communities, and increasing recreational fishing opportunities.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

3.1 Increase the economic value derived by the Nation from commercial and recreational fisheries.

3.2 Manage healthy fish stocks to achieve optimum yield.

3.3 Reduce the number of overcapitalized fisheries and mitigate the impacts of these reductions on fishing communities.

3.4 Minimize bycatch to the extent practicable, and minimize the mortality of unavoidable bycatch.

3.5 Implement the NOAA Fisheries plan to achieve the goals of the interagency Recreational Fishery Resources Conservation Plan.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 3

3.1.1 We will develop social and economic models and collect the data needed to measure net economic and social benefits to the Nation from living marine resources.

3.1.2 We will expand international markets for U.S. seafood products by pursuing reductions in tariffs imposed on such products by member nations of the World Trade Organization and by investigating opportunities for trade expansion into emerging markets.

3.2.1 We will assist the Councils in reviewing optimum yield levels for consistency with the revised definition in the Sustainable Fisheries Act.

3.3.1 We will explore the use of all available tools, including vessel and permit reduction programs where needed, to reduce fishing capacity in overcapitalized fisheries.

3.3.2 We will develop recommendations for implementation of a standardized fishing vessel registration and information management system which will include all commercial and charter fishing vessels within the geographic authority of the Councils, and we will make recommendations regarding the inclusion or exclusion of recreational fishing vessels.

3.3.3 We will work with the National Academy of Sciences to develop a comprehensive report on individual fishing quota programs, including recommendations to implement a national policy with respect to such programs.

3.3.4 To the extent practicable and consistent with the prevention of overfishing, we will take into account the importance of fishery resources to coastal communities when developing conservation and management measures.

3.4.1 We will establish a standardized reporting methodology to assess the amount and type of bycatch occurring in each fishery covered by an FMP, and include in each FMP conservation and management measures which will minimize bycatch where possible, and minimize the mortality of bycatch where it is unavoidable.

3.4.2 We will work in cooperation with the fishing industry and gear manufacturers to improving gear selectivity, design and field test new gear designs and modifications, and evaluate gear regulations.

3.5.1 We will provide for increased recreational fishing opportunities through the conservation, restoration, and enhancement of aquatic systems and fish populations, and by increasing fishing access, education and outreach, and partnership opportunities. This will include promotion of catch and release programs and measures to ensure the survival of fish caught and released under such programs.

Objective 4: Promote the development of robust and environmentally sound aquaculture

Aquaculture is defined as the propagation and rearing of aquatic organisms in controlled or selected aquatic environments for any commercial, recreational, or public purpose. Potential purposes of aquaculture include bait production, wild stock enhancement, fish culture for zoos and aquaria, rebuilding of populations of threatened and endangered species, and food production for human consumption.

The U.S. lags behind other nations in the use of aquaculture to meet the growing demand for seafood in the global marketplace. Domestic aquaculture presently supplies only 5.9 percent of the nation's seafood needs, while aquaculture worldwide accounted for 17 percent of global seafood production. Aquaculture provides opportunities to reduce our dependence on capture fisheries, to meet increased U.S. demand for year-round stable supplies of quality seafood, to reduce the U.S. trade deficit by decreasing our reliance on imported products while expanding U.S. exports to meet increasing demand overseas, and to alleviate the economic impacts of wild stock declines on coastal communities through the creation of new jobs and businesses. While aquaculture is not a substitute for wise management of wild stock fisheries, it is a vital tool to help meet the growing demand for seafood in the next century, and it will play a significant role in the future of our Agency.

For over one hundred years, NMFS has been developing techniques for the culture of marine organisms for both food production and wild stock enhancement. This specialized expertise along with its established infrastructure for management of living marine resources enables NMFS to support the development of a commercially viable and environmentally sound domestic aquaculture industry. NMFS, in partnership with other elements within NOAA and DOC, will address the impediments to the development of a domestic aquaculture industry and the necessary environmental safeguards associated with such development. These impediments include the lack of appropriate production technologies and a predictable and timely regulatory process. Emphasis will be placed on developing production technologies for candidate species, enhancement strategies for depleted stocks, and a regulatory framework and permitting process for aquaculture in the EEZ.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

4.1 Promote the commercial rearing of at least seven new species.

4.2 Reduce the time and cost of permitting environmentally sound aquaculture ventures.

4.3 Provide financial assistance for environmentally sound aquaculture ventures.

4.4 Identify areas in coastal waters and the EEZ suitable for environmentally sound aquaculture development.

4.5 Develop and implement environmentally sound aquaculture technologies and practices.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 4

4.1.1 We will study new candidate species for culture through their complete life cycle to determine which are economically and biologically suitable for commercial culture or wild stock enhancement.

4.2.1 We will develop, in cooperation with state and other federal agencies, and through the Joint Subcommittee on Aquaculture, rational, simplified permitting and regulatory processes which are based upon scientifically sound conservation policies, and which will lead to the establishment of a policy on the use of the EEZ for private aquaculture.

4.2.2 We will address user conflicts affecting aquaculture development, thereby creating a more predictable business climate in which aquaculture ventures can operate.

4.3.1 We will provide loans to environmentally sound aquaculture ventures through the Fisheries Finance Program.

4.4.1 We will determine requirements for the siting of aquaculture operations in the EEZ.

4.5.1 We will work with the aquaculture industry to develop, identify, evaluate and transfer technologies that are appropriate to both efficient aquaculture production and environmental protection.

RECOVERED PROTECTED SPECIES OBJECTIVES

Objective 5: Recover and maintain protected species populations

Many marine species populations are depleted or declining due to human activity in marine and other ecosystems, environmental variability, and other causes. NOAA Fisheries has a mandate to protect resources for their intrinsic or biological value, regardless of whether that value can be measured in the marketplace. The Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and other legislation, as well as international conventions, provide a clear indication of public support for strong efforts to protect and conserve these species.

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for protecting all cetaceans and pinnipeds (excluding walruses), regardless of population status, as well as those marine species listed as threatened or endangered under the Endangered Species Act. Recovering depleted, threatened, and endangered species and preventing the decline of others will contribute to the overall health and well-being of marine ecosystems.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

5.1 Maintain the health of all currently healthy marine mammal populations under our jurisdiction.

5.2 Slow or reverse the decline of all declining protected species under our jurisdiction.

5.3 Reduce human-caused threats to the recovery of depleted, candidate, threatened, or endangered species under our jurisdiction below 1996 levels.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 5

5.1.1 We will take proactive steps to prevent species from becoming threatened or endangered.

5.1.2 We will assess candidate species and strategic marine mammal stocks of uncertain status to determine whether human activities are posing a risk. These assessments require adequate monitoring of populations and ecosystem investigations, which take into account multi-species and habitat concerns.

5.2.1 We will place our greatest emphasis on species most in need of recovery efforts.

5.2.2 We will monitor the health and status of protected species and their habitats to identify areas where conservation measures must be focused for the greatest benefit to these resources.

5.2.3 We will review the progress of species recovery to ensure that expected results are being achieved.

5.2.4 We will implement management strategies and conservation measures as early as possible to minimize threats to the species and impacts on human activities.

5.3.1 We will develop and implement comprehensive conservation and recovery plans which are effective and responsive to species needs. With these plans, we will identify and minimize human actions that are detrimental to the protected species; characterize and assess habitat needs, including critical habitat; and assess the cumulative effects of environmental variability and human-related activities.

5.3.2 We will conduct Endangered Species Act consultations regarding federal actions that may affect listed species to ensure that impacts are minimized and that these actions do not jeopardize these species.

5.3.3 We will establish cooperative working relationships with government and non-government entities, both foreign and domestic, to promote conservation of protected resources.

Objective 6: Reduce conflicts that involve protected species

Many human activities such as fishing, shipping, coastal development, seismic exploration, and offshore mineral development lead to conflicts between humans and protected marine species. If these species are to be protected, the effects of these conflicts on the species must be minimized or eliminated. In addition, some marine mammals may have detrimental effects on other protected marine species or interfere with human activities. Since they are themselves protected, such conflicts must be handled with great care. Reducing or eliminating all these conflicts is an important part of our mandate to manage protected marine species.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

6.1 Reduce takes of protected species incidental to fishing and other human activities to biologically insignificant levels.

6.2 Reduce detrimental effects of marine mammals on other protected species, consistent with marine mammal conservation objectives.

6.3 Reduce marine mammal conflicts with human activities, consistent with marine mammal conservation objectives.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 6

6.1.1 We will identify and assess the magnitude of incidental takes of protected marine species.

6.1.2 We will establish sustainable levels of takes for all protected marine species and continue to improve the estimates of these levels through ecologically sound research.

6.1.3 We will work through domestic and international cooperative relationships with industry and environmental groups, including take reduction teams, special task forces, and other needed scientific collaborations.

6.1.4 We will increase public outreach and education to heighten awareness of activities which may harm protected marine species. This may involve the development of codes of conduct governing interactions with protected marine species in the wild.

6.1.5 We will explore, develop, and implement new technologies and practices for reducing detrimental interactions. When such technologies could reduce detrimental effects both to and from protected species in other nations, these technologies will be made available to those nations.

6.2.1 We will identify and assess the detrimental effects of marine mammals on other protected marine species.

6.3.1 We will take the lead in working with state, local, and private groups to identify and reduce the impacts of burgeoning pinniped populations on human activities and property.

HEALTHY LIVING MARINE RESOURCE HABITAT OBJECTIVES

Objective 7: Protect, conserve, and restore living marine resource habitat and biodiversity

The health of living marine resources is dependent upon the health of their habitat. No organism can live in isolation; all are dependent upon the health and biodiversity of the surrounding ecosystem, which provides the necessary ingredients of life. However, human activities can change, degrade, or destroy these habitats and the biodiversity associated with them. Habitat degradation is an important factor in the decline of many protected species and fish stocks.

Through research, consultation, and permit reviews, NOAA Fisheries seeks to protect these habitats from human-caused degradation while increasing our understanding of the interactions among living marine resources and the ecosystems they inhabit. We will use this increased understanding to develop the ability to manage resources by focusing on the entire ecosystem rather than on individual species or ecosystem components.

Where habitat loss has already occurred, NOAA Fisheries can effect a positive change through restoration of degraded habitats and creation of new habitat in areas that were previously unavailable or inadequate for use by living marine resources. These restoration efforts also counteract continuing unavoidable losses of habitat.

Please note that our efforts to identify and conserve essential fish habitat are discussed under Objective 2 on pages 14 and 15.

Performance Measures

In the next 5 years, NOAA Fisheries will:

7.1 Protect and conserve wetlands which support living marine resources to achieve no net loss in accordance with national policy.

7.2 Restore and create living marine resource habitat to offset unavoidable human-caused loss.

7.3 Develop habitat baselines and monitoring methods that provide quantitative indicators of habitat status and program success.

Strategies for the Achievement of Objective 7

7.1.1 We will conduct consultations on permit reviews, with continued emphasis on wetland, waterway, and hydropower permits. Full implementation of the essential fish habitat provisions of the Magnuson-Stevens Act will contribute to this strategy (see Objective 2 on pages 14 and 15).

7.1.2 We will work with Congress and the Administration to incorporate conservation concerns in legislation affecting living marine resource habitat and review proposed legislation for language that would conflict with our habitat goals.

7.1.3 We will implement cooperative approaches at the local level in habitat conservation and restoration, including greater involvement in the review of Federal Energy Regulatory Commission activities.

7.2.1 We will work to remove human-caused impediments to anadromous fish passage through rivers and streams and to increase the survival of anadromous fish passing through hydroelectric facilities.

7.2.2 We will work to reverse damage to living marine resources and their habitat resulting from oil and other contaminant spills.

7.3.1 We will define the key aspects of vital habitat functions and increase our understanding of how they affect marine and anadromous species and how they are affected by human activities. This will involve the development of new methods of evaluating the quality and productivity of restored habitats, as well as improved restoration and creation technologies, including contaminant remediation, to ensure that created habitats are effective.

7.3.2 We will establish criteria to define and delineate marine, estuarine, and riverine ecosystems for management purposes, and we will identify indicators for assessing the status and detecting changes in the health of such ecosystems.

7.3.3 We will establish an inventory of living marine resource habitats (tied to *Our Living Oceans*) and implement measures to monitor the trends in habitat availability.

VI. FOUNDATIONS FOR STEWARDSHIP

Underlying and supporting our stewardship of living marine resources are ongoing activities which have no end point or defined result, but which are necessary for the fulfillment of our mission. These include our scientific research capabilities, communication with our constituents, our partnerships with other organizations, enforcement of our regulations and management regimes, and internal coordination and infrastructure, including our dedicated workforce.

It is impossible to define stewardship results and performance measures for these activities because they contribute to our management ability in general rather than to any particular resource or objective. Nonetheless, we felt that this plan would not be complete without discussing and defining our strategy in these areas, which are so central to our mission and our day-to-day work. This was especially true after meeting with our constituents, who repeatedly emphasized to us the importance of collaboration and partnerships to the fulfillment of our mission. In this section, we describe initiatives for the following five foundations, which underpin all the work that we do:

1. Science which is of the highest quality and which advances our ability to make living marine resource management decisions
2. Communication and collaboration with constituents
3. Strong and productive partnerships
4. Enforcement and regulatory effectiveness
5. Agency management, infrastructure, and workforce

Foundation 1: Science which is of the highest quality and which advances our ability to make living marine resource management decisions

The stewardship of living marine resources requires complete and accurate scientific information regarding the status of living marine resource populations. This encompasses their responses to environmental changes, exploitation, and other human activities that affect them and their habitats. We must also have information about the complex social, political, and economic issues involved in living marine resource management.

This information must be comprehensive, objective, credible, and effectively communicated. It is used not just for current management decisions, but also to anticipate future trends, assure future utilization opportunities, and assess the success or failure of our management efforts. NOAA Fisheries is responsible for ensuring that management decisions are based on the highest quality scientific information. We are also responsible for ensuring that this information, and thus the management decisions for which they provide the foundation, are understood and accepted by user groups and other constituents. To further this, the Sustainable Fisheries Act has mandated that we provide a role for commercial fishers in our fisheries research.

During the next 5 years, we will improve the quality and credibility of our science by:

F1.1 Expanding and improving our system for peer review of scientific advice by panels of knowledgeable scientists from both within and outside government.

F1.2 Improving our professional standards for research and scientific advice by establishing national guidelines for technical program and staff performance evaluations, performance award programs, and professional career development opportunities.

F1.3 Implementing policies for ensuring the integrity and independence of science to ensure that our science programs, analyses, and products are sound, credible, and provide an objective basis for management.

F1.4 Implementing our vessel replacement plan that integrates government, university, and industry vessel capabilities to provide the state-of-the-art facilities necessary for the advancement of our varied at-sea research programs.

F1.5 Developing new science-based resource assessment and management techniques, including multi-species and limited access approaches to living marine resource conservation and management.

F1.6 Improving our data collection and analysis techniques and systems.

F1.7 Improving our fishery management data systems.

F1.8 Increasing our ability to incorporate economic and social factors into our decision-making. This includes expanding the publication *Our Living Oceans* to include economic and sociocultural assessments of the nation's fisheries.

F1.9 Increasing our ability to predict natural living marine resource variation, which will result in more accurate assessments and estimation of the uncertainty associated with them.

F1.10 Providing a core fishery statistics program based on our strategic and operational needs. This will include the development and publishing of a strategic plan for fish-

eries research in cooperation with Councils, affected states, and other research entities. As mandated by the Sustainable Fisheries Act, this plan will identify and describe a comprehensive program with a limited number of priority objectives; identify goals and timetables for those objectives; provide a role for commercial fishers in such research, including involvement in field testing; and provide for timely collection and dissemination of research results.

F1.11 Involving constituents in research programs. To the extent practicable, we will charter fishing vessels to participate in research projects, invite constituents to participate aboard NOAA research vessels during resource surveys, encourage frequent contact and cooperation between scientists and constituents, and incorporate scientifically valid observations by fishers and others into fish stock assessments and other analyses related to living marine resources and their habitat.

F1.12 Providing a forum for answering questions and educating user groups on how research is conducted and how stock assessments are performed.

F1.13 Developing a new series of reports and presentations to communicate scientific results in simplified language that is easier to understand than traditional scientific publications.

F1.14 Requiring the various NOAA Fisheries grant programs to solicit input from external scientists in topical areas when identifying research initiatives.

F1.15 Participating in international scientific initiatives.

Foundation 2: Communication and collaboration with constituents

Accomplishment of our stewardship mission requires an open and honest exchange with our constituents. Stewardship is an ethic which must be held not only by NOAA Fisheries, but also by everyone who interacts with living marine resources. Furthering the stewardship ethic among our constituents is a vital part of our mission.

Living marine resource management involves many difficult and contentious issues, and this is reflected in our relations with our constituents. However, the enormous positive response we received to the series of constituent meetings we held in the course of constructing this plan points the way toward a more constructive approach to constituent relations. At these meetings, our constituents suggested that we take a more collaborative approach to management, explaining our management measures better and involving constituents in the management process more and earlier. In this way, NOAA Fisheries will build support for its management measures and encourage a stewardship ethic among user groups.

During the next 5 years, we will improve our relations with our constituents by:

F2.1 Holding round table discussions every six months in each region with constituents regarding regional and national plans and activities. At these meetings, we and our constituents can inform, listen, discuss, explain, and exchange views.

F2.2 Holding all public meetings with significant advance notice, wide advertisement, and at times and locations convenient to the expected participants. All public meetings will be followed up with a report of results, actions, and decisions.

F2.3 Establishing easily accessible communications links through electronic bulletin boards, web pages, and printed documents to provide up-to-date information to the public concerning fishery management and other NOAA Fisheries and Council activities.

F2.4 Publishing articles in outside publications, including trade magazines and regional newsletters. This will open a channel of routine communication between NOAA Fisheries and the public which is less formal and more accessible than the Federal Register.

F2.5 Making the updated NOAA Fisheries Brochure available at all public meetings.

F2.6 Establishing a NOAA Fisheries constituent database.

F2.7 Establishing a formal reporting mechanism for all research reports and manuscripts published by our scientists and taking every opportunity to make public presentations of all research results.

Foundation 3: Strong and productive partnerships

All federal agencies operate in an environment of limited resources, budgetary constraints, and increasing demands. One message that we heard consistently at all of our constituent meetings was that NOAA Fisheries needs to increase its partnering activities with other federal agencies, state and local authorities, universities, Native American tribes, Pacific Islanders, the commercial and recreational fishing industries, environmental groups, and international organizations.

We do not have the authority or the resources to accomplish all of the goals and objectives described in this plan on our own. We will need to reach out to others with similar mandates, both inside and outside of government, and seek new ways to work with them to achieve our mutual aims. Most of the initiatives discussed below are mentioned elsewhere in this plan, but are repeated here to emphasize our commitment to partnerships with others.

During the next 5 years, we will leverage our resources through partnerships by:

F3.1 Involving state and interstate management entities in implementing rebuilding schedules and assessing stocks.

F3.2 Collaborating with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service and other relevant agencies to support effective implementation of interstate FMPs.

F3.3 Involving community groups in our efforts to mitigate the negative economic impacts of fishery management on fishing communities.

F3.4 Working with industry and universities to identify new ways to reduce or utilize bycatch.

F3.5 Collaborating with Native American tribes to implement programs which affect the trust resources of these groups, consistent with federal trust responsibilities.

F3.6 Collaborating with state and tribal management partners, industry, anglers, and conservation groups to advance aquatic resource conservation, enhance recreational fishing opportunities, promote catch and release programs and assure the survival of fish caught under such programs, assist private landowners with aquatic resource conservation, and utilize cost-share programs.

F3.7 Working with the National Academy of Sciences to develop a comprehensive report on individual quota programs which will include recommendations to implement a national policy with respect to such programs.

F3.8 Working with state and other federal agencies to develop rational, simplified aquaculture permitting and regulatory processes.

F3.9 Establishing cooperative working relationships with relevant organizations to promote conservation efforts for marine mammals and other protected species.

F3.10 Developing partnerships with the fishing industry to devise new ways to decrease conflicts between protected species and fishing activities and gear.

F3.11 Developing and supporting cooperative agreements with state governments and tribes to conserve protected species.

F3.12 Engaging in community-based habitat restoration projects with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Coastal America, and other organizations.

F3.13 Leveraging external funding for habitat restoration activities from other organizations, such as the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers.

F3.14 Utilizing the NOAA Fisheries grant programs to promote constituent participation and involvement in the stewardship of living marine resources.

F3.15 Developing educational and informational initiatives to increase public participation in NOAA Fisheries grant programs.

F3.16 Ensuring the effectiveness and responsiveness of NOAA Fisheries grant programs through an internal review and evaluation process which includes the use of an electronic database which tracks grants, monitors the status of projects, and provides summaries of projects by species, activity, and geographic location.

F3.17 Strengthening the competitive grant solicitation and review process to assure that project funding is consistent with NOAA Fisheries' strategic objectives.

Foundation 4: Enforcement and regulatory effectiveness

The NOAA Office of Enforcement is charged with developing and carrying out programs, policies, and procedures necessary to enforce all statutes and regulations within NOAA's broad jurisdiction. More than 29 different statutes and acts require such enforcement activities. Although fisheries and protected species management plans are based on scientific research, these same plans are defined and administered through laws and regulations. Ensuring compliance with these laws and regulations is a key factor in the success of the plans. Fulfillment of our mission thus requires effective law enforcement programs and measures designed to educate the American public, deter potential offenders, and detect, apprehend and prosecute willful violators.

During the next 5 years, we will improve our enforcement and regulatory effectiveness by:

F4.1 Reducing violations which threaten common trust fishery resources by increasing our focus on international conspiratorial crimes that unlawfully remove fish or protected resources from the marine habitats of coastal states or the high seas.

F4.2 Curtailing violations involving illegal sale or shipment of contaminated seafood in interstate and international commerce.

F4.3 Increasing voluntary compliance through expanded interactions with constituents, including articulating the biological and economic benefits of compliance.

F4.4 Increasing observed compliance with spatial and temporal regulations for fisheries by using new technology and by promoting the use of vessel monitoring systems.

F4.5 Increasing the quality of investigations and prosecutions by improving NOAA Fisheries marine forensic science capabilities, expanding our use of forensic auditing and accounting procedures, and using advanced technologies to obtain evidence.

F4.6 Making regulations more comprehensible to those affected by them, especially fishermen. We will gain a better understanding of how our regulations affect our constituents. Then we will work with the regions and Councils to provide proposed regulatory language that reduces complexity, increases comprehension, and ensures enforceability.

Foundation 5: Agency management, infrastructure, and workforce

The quality of our performance depends upon the quality of our people and our organizational management systems. The issues and problems involved in the stewardship of living marine resources are extremely varied and complex, and they require the systematic and strategic application of knowledge, skill, and resources. As we move towards the next century, NOAA Fisheries is seeking to become more systematic and strategic in the application of our resources to the problems we face and to ensure that we have the means to effect these improvements.

During the next 5 years, we will improve our management, infrastructure, and workforce by:

F5.1 Institutionalizing strategic management. We will develop operational plans which will coordinate with our national strategic plan, and we will allocate agency resources to strategic objectives. We will assign clear responsibility and accountability for the accomplishment of strategic objectives.

F5.2 Improving internal communication within NOAA Fisheries through the timely distribution of information including notification and explanation of key decisions by the directorate affecting agency policies or employees.

F5.3 Creating, distributing, and periodically updating a document specifying NOAA Fisheries policy directives to appropriate personnel.

F5.4 Improving our information systems. We will ensure that employees, including field staff, have access to computer and telecommunications capabilities and training commensurate with their job responsibilities and that adequate technical support services are provided for computer systems. Shared agency information will be accessible to all employees.

F5.5 Developing, coordinating, and implementing new policies and legislative initiatives.

F5.6 Improving our human resource management. We will delegate authority to the lowest appropriate level and foster employee input into decision-making and involvement in the management process. We will ensure that policies and operating procedures are understood throughout the agency and are applied uniformly and consistently. Strengthened employee training programs and alternative incentive reward systems will improve the performance of our workforce. Finally, we will improve the diversity of our workforce to better reflect the composition of the U.S. population.

F5.7 Providing a safe working environment. We will ensure full compliance with all environmental and safety laws and regulations.

GLOSSARY

Biodiversity—The Biodiversity Convention defines biodiversity as "the variability among living organisms from all sources including, *inter alia*, terrestrial, marine and other aquatic ecosystems and the ecological complexes of which they are part; this includes diversity within species, between species and of ecosystems."

Bycatch—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *bycatch* as "fish which are harvested in a fishery, but which are not sold or kept for personal use, and includes economic discards and regulatory discards…[but not] fish released alive under a recreational catch and release fishery management program."

Cetaceans—Marine mammals consisting of whales, dolphins, and porpoises.

Commercial fishing—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *commercial fishing* as "fishing in which the fish harvested, either in whole or in part, are intended to enter commerce through sale, barter or trade."

Council—This refers to the Regional Fishery Management Councils established by the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act to prepare Fishery Management Plans and amendments for fisheries in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone.

Endangered Species Act (ESA)—The ESA is a statute which was enacted in 1973 to conserve species and ecosystems. Under its auspices, species facing possible extinction are listed as "threatened" or "endangered," or as "candidate" species for such listings. When such a listing is made, recovery and conservation plans are drawn up to ensure the protection of the species and its habitat.

Essential Fish Habitat—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *essential fish habitat* as "those waters and substrate necessary to fish for spawning, breeding, feeding or growth to maturity."

Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ)—The EEZ comprises an area which extends from the seaward boundaries of the coastal states (3 nautical miles, in most cases) to 200 miles off the coast of the United States. Within this area, the United States claims and exercises sovereign rights and exclusive fishery management authority over all fish and all Continental Shelf fishery resources.

Fishery—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *fishery* as "one or more stocks of fish which can be treated as a unit for purposes of conservation and management and which are identified on the basis of geographical, scientific, technical, recreational, and economic characteristics; and...any fishing for such stocks."

Fishing Community—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *fishing community* as "a community which is substantially dependent on or substantially engaged in the harvest or processing of fishery resources to meet social and economic needs, and includes fishing vessel owners, operators, and crew and United States fish processors that are based in such community."

Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act (MSFCMA)—The MSFCMA is a statute which was enacted in 1976 primarily to establish an Exclusive Economic Zone (see definition above) in which foreign fishing could be controlled, and to set up a conservation and management structure for U.S. fisheries. Senator Ted Stevens' name was appended to the title of the statute last year.

Marine Mammal Protection Act (MMPA)—The MMPA is a statute which was enacted in 1972 to protect marine mammals and their habitat. These species include whales, dolphins, seals, sea lions, walruses, and many others.

Maximum Sustainable Yield—MSY is the largest long-term average catch or yield that can be taken from a stock or stock complex under prevailing ecological and environmental conditions.

Optimum Yield—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *optimum yield* as "(A) the amount of fish which will provide the greatest overall benefit to the Nation, particularly with respect to food production and recreational opportunities, and taking into account the protection of marine ecosystems; (B) is prescribed as such on the basis of the maximum sustainable yield from the fishery, as reduced by any relevant economic, social, or ecological factor; and (C) in the case of an overfished fishery, provides for rebuilding to a level consistent with producing the maximum sustainable yield in such fishery."

Overfishing—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *overfishing* as "a rate or level of fishing mortality that jeopardizes the capacity of a fishery to produce the maximum sustainable yield on a continuing basis."

Pinniped—Marine mammals consisting of seals, sea lions, and walruses.

Protected Species—As used in this document, *protected species* refers to any species which is protected by either the ESA or the MMPA, and which is under the jurisdiction of NOAA Fisheries. This includes all threatened, endangered, and candidate species, as well as all cetaceans and pinnipeds excluding walruses.

Recreational Fishing—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines recreational fishing as "fishing for sport or pleasure."

Stock (of fish)—The Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act defines *stock* as "a species, subspecies, geographical grouping, or other category of fish capable of management as a unit."

Subsistence Fishing—*Subsistence fishing* means fishing for personal consumption or traditional/ceremonial purposes.

Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA)—The SFA is a statute enacted in 1996 which amended the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Among its provisions were mandatory overfishing elimination and stock rebuilding, the establishment of a program to protect essential fish habitat, and the establishment of a new national standard for bycatch reduction.

NOAA FISHERIES AGENCY STATEMENT

Our nation's living marine resources belong to all its citizens. NOAA Fisheries is entrusted with conserving and managing the fish, sea turtles, whales, seals, dolphins, and other marine mammals that live in our oceans. We work on behalf of all U.S. citizens to manage and sustain the Nation's marine life and habitats.

NOAA Fisheries advocates the sustainable use of living marine resources. These uses include commercial, recreational, and subsistence fishing, aquaculture, observation, and research. We support maximizing benefits to the Nation, while not threatening the continued existence of species and their habitat. We work with all segments of the public to balance competing needs and interests in the use and enjoyment of ocean resources.

NOAA Fisheries is responsible for ensuring that the best scientific information is used in management decisions. Our data collection and research are conducted in a broad range of scientific disciplines, including the natural and social sciences. Our scientists conduct high-quality research that is peer-reviewed both nationally and internationally. They contribute to the design of innovative management approaches, enhanced by technological improvements in monitoring and enforcement.

Effective communication is essential to the development and support of successful resource management and conservation policies. We support open and honest exchange of information. We believe that an informed public can help us reach attainable and measurable objectives.

NOAA Fisheries employees are our most important asset. Their competence, creativity, commitment, diversity, and innovation are vital to the Nation's interests in fishery conservation. NOAA Fisheries employees are proud of their work, and hold themselves accountable for their performance.

Finally, NOAA Fisheries is fundamentally dedicated to maintaining the Nation's marine heritage by ensuring the existence of productive, diverse, and healthy ocean ecosystems.