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Becoming an Ocean Advocate Through Experiential Learning

By Kate Dubickas and Alex Ilich

How can scientists most effectively introduce scientific ideas to a broader audience and influence political action? As the culmination of a semester-long ocean policy course at The University of South Florida College of Marine Science, students in the course, including the authors, traveled to Capitol Hill in June 2016 to visit the offices of several US representatives and senators to advocate for ecosystem-based fisheries management (EBFM). During the meetings, we

employed knowledge and tactics we gained from the course and from advocacy at the local level. In our classes, we covered a variety of landmark legislation and frameworks that guide management of our ocean, including the Law of the Sea, the National Environmental Policy Act, and the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act. Throughout the class and while in Washington, we honed our policy advocacy skills by meeting with legislative staffers as well as lobbyists and experts from the Pew Charitable Trust, the Ocean Conservancy, and an environmental law firm. These meetings taught us the efficacy of working at the local level, focusing a message on one to three succinct points, and delivering a message in a “problem-solution-ask” framework—clearly presenting a problem, proposing a tangible solution, and directly asking the listener to commit to a specific action.

We began our advocacy training at the local level. As students in the class and as residents of the Tampa Bay area, we wrote and submitted op-eds to local newspapers



From left to right our class members: Megan Hepner, Ileana Freytes-Ortiz, Stephanie Mills, Kate Dubickas, Dr. Mark Luther, Kelly Vasbinder, Matthew McCarthy, and Alex Ilich.

on ocean issues that directly affect our region, such as the impacts of large pier construction on the Tampa Bay marine environment and the importance of purchasing sustainable seafood and how to identify it in restaurants and supermarkets. This activity put us, the scientists, in charge of the narrative. Working with the newspaper editors taught us how to navigate the press world and make scientific abstractions accessible to a general audience through techniques such as providing understandable metaphors rather than presenting lengthy technical explanations of complex concepts. As a result of this course, a classmate of ours has had several op-eds published in the *Tampa Bay Times*, including “Establish trust fund for coastal recovery,” and has continued to contribute to the newspaper.


In addition to working with the local print media, we met with elected officials to discuss local politics. In a meeting with Mayor Rick Kriseman of St. Petersburg, we focused on what a coastal city and marine science hub could do to become

a better steward for our ocean. Mayor Kriseman was very receptive to our larger concerns about the marine environment, but we also worked on devising a creative solution to a specific issue—the negative impact of Styrofoam on the local environment. Florida state law “preempts” or prohibits municipalities from banning Styrofoam products in Florida. Thus, instead we asked the mayor if all city events could be made Styrofoam-free, an action that remained within the city’s

authority. Just a few weeks after our meeting, the mayor announced that the city would stop purchasing Styrofoam products for internal use and events. It wasn’t the city-wide ban we had hoped for, nevertheless, by thinking globally but acting locally and keeping our message focused, we won a small but tangible victory for the local environment.

After meeting with the local Tampa government, we began preparing for our meetings with members of Congress. Using the problem-solution-ask framework, and integrating our expertise in marine science with our increasing knowledge of science policy, our class consulted with expert guest speakers to craft our message, develop a strategy, and schedule meetings with congressional offices. We decided to advocate for EBFM, a fisheries management strategy that takes into consideration a variety of biological interactions and environmental factors when establishing catch limits, as opposed to the traditional single-species approach that assesses the stock of

each fish species in isolation. More specifically, we asked Congress to incorporate EBFM in the next reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, the primary law governing marine fisheries management in US federal waters. We crafted a message for a bipartisan audience and provided specific state and regional examples to illustrate why addressing this issue was important for constituents of senators and representatives from both parties. Although we didn't achieve our ultimate goal of persuading Congress to include EBFM into the Magnuson-Stevens Act reauthorization, we did win the support of Rep. Kathy Castor, whose district covers the city of Tampa and parts of the surrounding county, and who signed a letter of support in favor of EBFM.

When we enrolled in a course that focused on science policy and communication, we sought to acquire insight into how to address the many problems facing today's ocean and the rising distrust of scientific evidence. We learned that presenting issues in tandem with resolutions in a clear and focused manner, through media outlets and in meetings with elected officials at all levels, communicates scientific ideas to the world outside the university and can influence the actions of the persons who wield governmental power. Through this course, we gained knowledge and practiced skills that not only have made us better advocates for our science but also have helped to facilitate positive change for our ocean. 

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