

Our oceans are in deep trouble, but it's not too late

■ **Frank Muller-Karger**

While terrorism threats, military conflict and contentious political battles consume the public, our nation faces another security threat of global proportions. The 16-member U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, appointed by President Bush in September of 2001, just reported that our oceans, coasts and Great Lakes are in deep trouble. Our nation faces a significant security threat that requires the undivided attention of our leaders across the political spectrum.

A diverse group with experience in science, exploration, resource management, conservation and development, transportation, naval defense and law, the commission spent the last three years learning about our maritime nation's needs and opportunities through 16 public meetings, 445 witnesses, comment from 37 state governors, five tribal leaders, 800 interested stakeholders, and 1,900 pages of testimony. The Ocean Commission held its final meeting in Washington, D.C., at the end of July and presented its findings and recommendations to the president of the United States.

We learned that roughly a third of the world's major fish stocks are overexploited and many species of fish, including some popular domestic species of grouper and red snapper, are threatened. Pollution from city streets, sewage overflows and industrial sources are choking the oceans and washing onto our coral reefs. Agricultural fertilizer flooding into the Gulf of Mexico has contributed to a "dead zone" that covers an area the size of the state of New Jersey every year. In 2003, pollution forced 2,000 beach closings in Florida and 18,000 beach closings and swim advisories, nationally.

We need healthy maritime resources. The importance of our oceans, coastal areas and Great Lakes to the cruise industry, commercial fishing, recreation and tourism cannot be underestimated. Nearly half of the nation's

gross national product and half of the nation's jobs are generated and located in coastal watersheds. Our ports, gateways to ocean trade and commerce, handle 20 percent of the world's imports and 12 percent of the world's exports. The oceans lapping our shores play a vital ecological role in global cycles of oxygen and carbon dioxide. As a new source for medicines, as a continuing source for fossil fuels and as a trap for a large portion of greenhouse gases — such as carbon dioxide — that we inject into our atmosphere, the oceans are at the heart of our future.

The better news is that the oceans present opportunities to improve our way of life and our economy. With careful attention, public education, agency interaction and key targeted changes in governance, the threat can be turned around.

The 15 agencies that manage our ocean resources, and even offices within these agencies, struggle to communicate with each other effectively. To change this, we recommended establishing a National Ocean Council made up of key federal agencies and chaired by a presidential assistant with a role similar to that of the national security adviser. A primary objective of the council would be to improve the integration of ocean- and coastal-related management and science so that the government is more aligned with and responsive to ecological processes. Such a change is also needed to ensure that our government serves us, and the agencies are not consumed with their own turf and budgets. The council would also further regional coordination for working across political boundaries. While only regional vision can address ecosystem-scale problems, coordination is essential. This revamping will not add another layer of bureaucracy but will instead help break down bureaucratic walls.

Second, we recommend a significant increase in support for science, including the establishment of an Integrated Oceans Observing System to act like a national

"weather service" for the oceans and incorporate existing regional, state and local coastal observing and monitoring systems. This will help provide the information to managers in real time to deal with issues like search and rescue, managing the health of our coral reefs so that the 30 percent decline in coral cover we have seen in the Florida Keys over the past 20 years is reversed and, indeed, better understand how we can cope with the significant and real threat of climate change.

We also recommend an effort to embrace all coastal areas and decisionmakers. We emphasized the important role of the states in studying, monitoring and managing our nation's coastal resources, as opposed to a "top-down" approach managed by the federal agencies. Resources in federal waters belong to all Americans and, therefore, management strategies that represent the public's concerns need to be developed.

Finally, we recognized the critical role of education and public awareness as a means to help protect our ocean resources over the long term. We need to bring ocean education into the classroom to help develop a national vision by which all of us are stewards of our nation's environment.

The oceans, coastlines and Great Lakes can be saved from our past and present abuse. Politics should not impede ensuring our collective future. Protecting maritime resources is vital to our interests, *both economic and ecological*. Over 71 percent of our planet is covered by oceans; millions make a living in jobs related to our ocean resources; millions upon millions live in coastal areas. We owe it to our oceans, and owe it to ourselves, to take better and proper care of what cannot be replaced. Our nation's leaders need to act, and lead, in that direction. Ignoring the national security threats identified by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy is not an option.

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