

## From sea to shining sea

June 8, 2005 | James D. Watkins and Leon E. Panetta | *The Washington Times*

We take our oceans for granted. We order fish at restaurants and assume it will always be there. We visit aquariums and believe that the oceans are full of the same species. We see fishing boats in our harbors and know that fishing will always be a part of our heritage. But what if we are wrong?

Over the last 50 years, increased fishing pressure, technological advances, coastal development and pollution have resulted in the loss of huge quantities of fish and other ocean wildlife and the habitat upon which they depend. Our ability to catch fish more quickly than they can reproduce, the rising demand for seafood and the degradation of important fish habitat have created an indisputable fish crisis — part of the complex array of coastal and marine challenges now confronting our nation.

Until we find a way to balance the huge demands upon our oceans' valuable resources with sustainable management of their fragile riches, our ready supply of fresh seafood, as well as countless jobs in the fishing industry, are at enormous risk.

America will celebrate National Fishing and Boating Week during June 4-12 and, today, World Oceans Day. This is a great opportunity to urge our leaders to dramatically improve ocean management. It is also an important time for this administration and Congress to show that we, as a nation, are serious about making the changes recommended by two national ocean commissions—the Pew Oceans Commission and the congressionally mandated U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.

Both commissions concluded that our current management is compromising the ocean's greatest resources, costing us jobs, hurting ocean-dependent communities and putting our future at risk. Both recommended significant changes to our nation's fishery policies to move us toward ecosystem-based management and restore America's ocean legacy.

The debate has started over what's right and wrong with our fisheries management system and how to make it better. Sen. Ted Stevens and other members of Congress have unofficially launched an effort to revise the Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act, the landmark law he helped author almost 30 years ago to manage our nation's federal fisheries.

Although Congress updated and revised the Magnuson-Stevens act in 1996 to set specific policies to end overfishing, reduce bycatch, and protect ocean habitats essential for commercial and recreational fisheries, significant problems remain because fishery managers have often failed to fully implement these amendments. The good news is that we can improve our national system of fisheries, with potentially stunning results. Restoring depleted fish stocks could yield significant economic benefits. In fact, the National Marine Fisheries Service estimated in 1999 that rebuilding fish populations would, in the long term, increase catch levels by 64 percent, adding \$1.3 billion to the U.S. economy.

Such a positive outcome is within reach. Specifically, the two commissions called on Congress to promote sustainable fisheries and to strengthen the role of science in fishery decisions by having independent scientists set the allowable catch rates. In addition, the Commission on Ocean Policy urged Congress to broaden public representation on regional fishery councils and to increase collaborative research between fishermen and scientists to reduce fishing impacts on ocean ecosystems. By adopting these changes, we can ensure that America's oceans — our vast public trust — will remain healthy for us and for future generations.

Neither commission report painted an entirely bleak picture, each noting several success stories in fisheries management. We need to learn from these success stories and strengthen what works. Likewise, we must recognize the problems noted by the commissions and make course corrections to improve what doesn't work. Although America's fishery policy is based on sound principles, the law needs to be strengthened to reflect the latest scientific information, changing technology and our own practical experience to achieve the law's goals.

As America celebrates its oceans this week, we urge Congress to consider these and other recommendations offered by our two commissions. We stand at the crossroads of our ocean legacy: The need is great, the players are assembled and the path is illuminated by lessons learned. We hope that Congress and the White House will take full advantage of this opportunity in our nation's history to strengthen our fisheries laws to ensure a sustainable future for this invaluable resource. We cannot take our oceans for granted.

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