

An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century

The MATE Center will be examining the far-reaching impact of the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy's findings in a series of articles. This first article in the series provides a general overview of the final report.

The United States recently took a major step towards protecting and managing its oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes. In September, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy turned its final report, *An Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century*, in to Congress and the President. Established by Congress with the passage of the Oceans Act of 2000, the Commission was chartered to make recommendations for a comprehensive national ocean policy.

A Comprehensive Ocean Policy

The Oceans Act acknowledged the dramatic changes in our nation's oceans and coasts since the last comprehensive review of U.S. ocean policy more than 35 years ago. In that time, more than 37 million people and 19 million homes have been added to coastal areas, and marine transportation, coastal recreation, and tourism have increased in economic importance.

The Commission's 16 members were appointed by President Bush and include representatives from the public service, education, private industry, and government sectors. The Commission held numerous public meetings and site visits in every coastal region and the Great Lakes, and heard testimony from nearly 500 technical experts, researchers, government officials, private citizens, and other interested parties. The four-year process resulted in a final report that contains 212 recommendations and weighs in at 610 pages. By law, the President must prepare a response to the report and present it to Congress within 90 days.

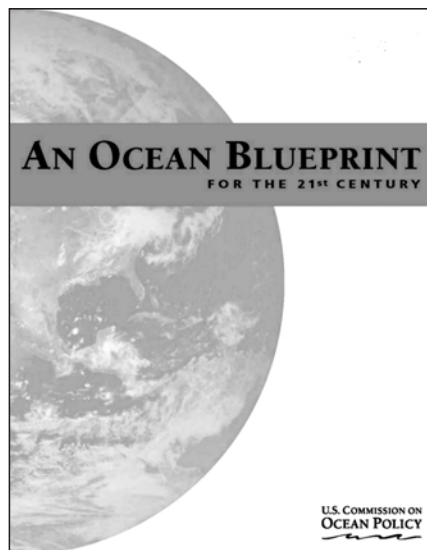
Ecosystem-Based Management

The Commission's recommendations were driven by the realization that the nation's ocean and coastal management policy is currently based on political boundaries. The Commission recognized that ocean and coastal management should instead reflect the complex relationships between multiple ecosystem components, according to Dr. Robert Ballard, a member of the Commission. "Ecosystem-based management requires cutting across political boundaries," says Dr. Ballard, who is a professor of oceanography and the director of the Institute for Archaeological Oceanography at the University of Rhode Island.

The emphasis on political boundaries has created a confusing number of government agencies that make it difficult for the general public to understand important issues, says Dr. Ballard. "In space exploration, NASA is the ultimate authority," he continues. "But with the ocean, it's more like the Tower of Babel because there are so many different perspectives."

Recommendations for Saving our Oceans and Coasts

To implement ecosystem-based management, the panel recommended dramatic organizational restructuring at the federal level, including the establishment of a National Ocean Council in the Executive Office of the President and the reorganization of NOAA to be independent from the Department of Commerce, which currently oversees it. The Commission believes that an independent NOAA would be a stronger agency—much like NASA.



Courtesy of www.oceancommission.gov

Other important Commission recommendations include the doubling of spending on ocean research, enhanced ocean education, a national ocean monitoring system, measurable goals for reducing water pollution, and improved fisheries management.

The members of the Commission understood that its ambitious proposals can't be implemented without funding. They suggested that existing appropriations for ocean- and marine-related programs be supplemented by a newly-created Ocean Trust Fund.

Currently, the federal government receives approximately \$5 billion in revenue from leasing fees generated by commercial oil and gas activities in federal waters. About \$1 billion of this revenue is allocated by law to certain existing preservation funds and coastal states, but the remainder is deposited into the general treasury. The Commission recommended that these unallocated funds instead

be diverted into an Ocean Trust Fund. "America is making a profit on the ocean," says Dr. Ballard. "It's only logical that the ocean should be managed by the money that's being made from it."

The founder and president of the Institute For Exploration at Connecticut's Mystic Aquarium, Dr. Ballard is primarily interested in the aspects of ocean management involving ocean exploration and marine education. "Most people are unaware of how uncharted the ocean is," he says. "We have better maps of Mars than we have of the southern hemisphere of our own planet!"

The Importance of Ocean Education

As a lifelong educator, Dr. Ballard believes that education is the best way for people to reach logical decisions. As an example, he cited lack of understanding about non-point source pollution, which includes fertilizers, insecticides, herbicides, oil, grease, salt, animal waste, and other pollutants that are deposited into oceans, lakes, and rivers by rainfall or snowmelt. "The Commission found that non-point source pollution is a huge problem for our oceans' health," he explains. "But people generally don't understand that ocean pollution is caused by runoff from farms in the middle of the country."

"Science sometimes gives people things that are politically tough to deal with," he continues. "But education helps people understand the consequences of their actions and act more responsibly."

The Commission's report has already resulted in some positive action. For example, Congress recently transferred a ship from the U.S. Navy to NOAA, along with \$18 million to equip it for ocean exploration. In addition, NOAA's ocean education budget was recently increased. And Dr. Ballard is enthusiastic about a new initiative that will provide federal funding for informal education such as aquariums. "I'm glad to see the realization that millions of Americans go to aquariums," he says. "With federal funding, even more people will be able to take advantage of these resources."

Such incremental successes leave Dr. Ballard with high expectations about the results of the Commission's report. "I have a really good feeling about many of the recommendations actually happening," he says. "Will they happen tomorrow? No. Will they happen in my lifetime? Yes."

To read the Commission's complete report, visit www.oceancommission.gov