

**Beneath the surface of our largest resource and treasure**

**By Sam Farr**

***The Hill Newspaper***

**June 17, 2008**

Arthur C. Clarke put it best when he said, "How inappropriate to call this planet Earth, when clearly it is Ocean."

So how sad I find it that we turn a blind eye to the continued neglect and abuse of our oceans. We've done a great job tromping through the most remote rain forests and highest mountain peaks, but we have failed miserably with our oceans. In fact, we've done a better job exploring the moon. Considering how vital oceans are to our health, commerce and science, we ignore them at our own peril.

At least we're not shy about recognizing oceans. President Bush has designated June as National Oceans Month, and we recently celebrated World Ocean Day. This month also saw scientists, legislators and other marine leaders converge on Monterey, Calif., for the Ocean Science Summit 2008. Further, we had Capitol Hill Oceans Week.

Why the need for this full-court press? Let's start with the most superficial reason, money. A recent study dropped a few figures worthy of attention: beach visits generate up to \$30 billion a year, recreational fishing another \$26 billion and coastal wildlife viewing up to \$49 billion. These three small segments of the vast ocean economy pump \$100 billion into our economy each year.

But that's only part of the story. The oceans play a major role in climate change, both as regulator of temperature and as victim of much damage. A recent study appearing in *Science* magazine reported that 60-year-old ocean water coming to the surface had absorbed carbon dioxide from the 1950s atmosphere and was more acidic than expected.

There's no telling how bad things could get. Our coastal communities, in particular, experience some of the harshest effects of climate change. From sea-level rise to the destruction of

wetlands to changing weather patterns, sick oceans mean a lower quality of life for millions.

Although we're saddled with a national ocean policy that is a muddled mess, there is a solution. H.R. 21, known as Oceans-21, will provide a national ocean policy and a framework for national and regional management of our shared ocean resources. It will help coordinate the 120 laws and 20 agencies that currently oversee our oceans.

And most importantly, it will give a voice to regional experts, bringing the most knowledgeable stakeholders to the table.

This bill has already passed out of subcommittee 11-3 and enjoys wide bipartisan support. Preserving our oceans is not a one-party issue. Two of the most vocal supporters of this bill are Republican Reps. Wayne Gilchrest (Md.) and Jim Saxton (N.J.). Supporters of the status quo may line up against this bill, but that only energizes those who seek true reform.

This legislation will finally give the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration a legal mandate. (Take note: NOAA has never been codified in law.) It creates an ocean adviser in the president's cabinet and establishes an Oceans and Great Lakes Conservation Trust Fund to support the regional governance partnerships.

We have frameworks allowing for comprehensive governance of our land and air, but we have no rational structure to govern the oceans. Oceans-21 consolidates national ocean management and creates a system of regional governance we desperately need.

Ten years ago President Clinton and Vice President Gore convened a National Ocean Conference in Monterey, the precursor to the recent gathering. For the first time ever, all parties with a stake in U.S. ocean policy came together. Since then, we've made some great progress, but there is still so much left to be done.

Four years ago the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, which grew out of that 1998 conference, released the "Ocean Blueprint for the 21st Century." That report opened with an excellent summary:

“America's oceans and coasts are priceless assets. Indispensable to life itself, they also contribute significantly to our prosperity and overall quality of life. Too often, however, we take these gifts for granted, underestimating their value and ignoring our impact on them. Then our use of the oceans becomes abuse, and the productive capacity of our marine resources is diminished.”

Those words are just as true today as when they were printed. We must decide to treat the disease, not the symptoms, or we will continue to see problems. It's time we end this cycle of neglect and address decades of abuse. It's time to enact Oceans-21 and fulfill our responsibilities.

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