

Oceanographer Sees 'Oceans of Trouble'

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Over the past three years, two distinguished panels - the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy and the Pew Oceans Commission - released major reports that found our oceans and coasts in serious trouble. Like the 9/11 Commission, the Ocean Commissions proposed detailed recommendations to avert a crisis in homeland security. The homeland crisis in our oceans, however, is getting worse, not better, says a Florida oceanographer.

“So far, those who could make a big difference have ignored most of the recommendations,” said Frank Muller-Karger, a professor at the University of South Florida College of Marine Science who served on the 16-member U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy. “Inaction continues to impact our health, economy and jobs. We continue to be short-sighted and manage our ocean resources by crisis rather than by conscience.”

According to Muller-Karger, the nation's marine territory is at risk, suffering from increasing pollution, over fishing and problems related to over-development.

“Federal waters are like federal lands - whatever is in them belongs to all of us, not to the government, or some company,” charges Muller-Karger. “Our goal should be to hold our government accountable for managing our resources properly, and doing it in a way that does not deplete them in the lifetime of our generation. To me, this means that we need an ecosystem-based management strategy.”

Muller-Karger advocates for the need to recognize that water, air and living and non-living resources do not follow - or live by - political boundaries.

“The oceans are an interconnected web of animals, plants, and people living across a complex geography,” he explains. “A change in one area sends a ripple that affects everything else in the system.”

Members of both commissions created the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, which released an Ocean Policy Report Card evaluating efforts made by the administration and Congress.

“The results are discouraging,” he says. “The average grade was a barely passing D+.”

One serious problem, says Muller-Karger, is that we have upwards of 14 federal agencies charged with ocean issues. These agencies are, in turn, overseen by more than 60 congressional committees and subcommittees.

“There is too much duplication, too little coordination and too little funding,” he charges.

Moving in the right direction doesn't have to be very expensive. The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy carefully estimated the costs of each of its recommendations. They concluded that an Ocean Policy Trust Fund of between two and four billion dollars per year should be established to better support management of our oceans and coasts.

“No one, as of yet, is talking about such a trust fund, which leads to an “F” on the report card for lack of funding,” asserts Muller-Karger. “This is a modest investment compared to the ultimate benefit of protecting our property, life, and coastal resources. It is an investment that will stimulate our coastal economies.”

Muller-Karger also suggests that all is not lost. Through public awareness and public activity, through events such as the upcoming “Oceans Day,” which Floridians will celebrate April 19, information about the importance of our ocean resources can be communicated to policy makers.

Source: University of South Florida

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