

Report card gives oceans of trouble

An assessment of U.S. oceans policy shows a dangerous lack of funding and leadership.

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You wouldn't allow a C-minus medical student to perform surgery on you, or entrust your taxes to an accountant who averaged a C-minus in math. But the government, to whom we have entrusted the protection of our natural resources, is putting in only a C-minus effort toward managing our oceans.

Every day we use goods and medicines, breathe air, drink water or deal with weather that in some way relates to the ocean. Yet the health of ocean and coastal ecosystems is declining because the government's approach is ineffective.

The nonpartisan Joint Ocean Commission Initiative has just released its 2006 U.S. Ocean Policy Report Card on the government's performance in ocean affairs. This year's grades are troubling.

Fisheries management reform: B-plus (previously a C-plus).

A major accomplishment was reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act, a bipartisan bill increasing effective management of U.S. fisheries. The bill includes stronger language on illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing in international waters.

Recreational fishing in Florida generates an estimated \$8.3-billion in economic impact, while commercial fishing yields \$1.1-billion. Such numbers call for better enforcement of fisheries stock and management.

International leadership: D-minus (up from last year's F).

The oceans are an international resource, yet our senators have not yet ratified the U.N. Convention on the Law of the Sea. Ratifying this treaty would let us sit at the table with countries negotiating to extend their Exclusive Economic Zones beyond the 200 nautical miles we each now claim.

National ocean governance reform: C-minus (up from last year's D-plus).

Tampa Bay is unique in that local businesses generously support public education in ocean sciences. Here, USF marine science graduate students learn scientific diving techniques.

With a stroke of the pen, the president created the Northwestern Hawaiian Islands Marine National Monument, which includes nearly 140,000 square miles of ocean territory. However, little has been done to change an inefficient system, and there is still a need for a multi-issue, interagency mechanism to guide, oversee and coordinate all aspects of coastal and ocean science and policy.

Regional and state ocean governance reform: A-minus (raised from a B-minus).

Several states have implemented conservation measures. But there can still be better communication between state and regional groups under a national framework, coordinated with the federal government.

Research, science and education: D-plus (from a D).

We invested in science and technology several decades ago, leading us to where we are today. Now, instead of finding ways to keep our edge, we have cut funding for science education and research. Science education is failing at all grade levels. Only about 30 percent of adults understand basic environmental concepts, and even fewer are familiar with more complicated issues such as ecosystem decline or watershed degradation. Everyone seems to have formed an opinion on global warming, yet most people know little about this problem. Understanding nature is necessary for better management of ocean resources. We need to train future generations of scientists and engineers, and continue investing in research.

New funding for ocean policy and programs: F.

The oceans play an essential role in daily life. Our waters support more than 2-million jobs and generate about \$117-billion in revenue every year. Some 80 percent of Floridians live or work in coastal counties, and more than 1,000 people move to Florida every day. Yet our federal investment in ocean research is now a mere 3.5 percent of the total federal research budget, compared to the 7 percent we used to invest 25 years ago.

The U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy recommended that Congress establish an ocean trust fund of royalties and fees collected for private use of marine resources that belong to all of us. This would be reinvested in research, education and management.

Lack of money shows lack of commitment. Lack of action shows lack of leadership. If our priorities don't change, we'll end up lacking healthy coasts. This new Congress has a responsibility to take actions recommended by the President's Ocean Commission in 2004.

Ultimately, each of us has to become involved and press our elected leaders to have effective environmental and ocean policies. Ask your elected officials what they are doing to keep your resources.

Although, our ocean policy grades have slightly improved this year, we are still on academic probation. If your child brought home a similar report card, would you put it on the refrigerator?

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