Whose Ocean?

BY ZEKE GRADER

FOR THOUSANDS OF YEARS fishermen have plied the world’s oceans. On the waters covering most of the earth’s surface they have engaged in their trade longer than any other human occupation, it is said, save prostitution.

Yet in all this millennia, fishermen have had little say over the fate of the oceans. Despite their long tenure on the seas, their experience and knowledge of them, the relationship between their well-being and that of the waters they work, they are ignored. Decisions on the oceans and their uses, rather, have been left to princes and politicians, mandarins and dilettantes. Merchants, masters of war and captains of industry have all had a say; not so for captains and crew of fishing vessels.

Fishermen have been treated as poachers in the king’s forest. And it’s still true today, in spite of promises of inclusion.

That was certainly the case with The Economist/National Geographic “World Ocean Conference” held February, 2014, in Half Moon Bay, exuding the Anglo-American exceptionalism of its host publications and offering up a dog’s breakfast of actions, mainly aimed at curtailing fishing.

Discussion of the biggest threat to the ocean and the planet, namely climate change, was avoided, and fishermen, made scapegoats at the conference for much of the ocean’s ills, were left wondering whose ocean it is and whether anyone was serious about saving it.

We had held out hope for the conference the State Department announced for last June in DC. Secretary of State John Kerry, after all, had been a good friend of the fishing community when he was US Senator from Massachusetts. He and former Defense Secretary Leon Panetta were the only speakers at the World Oceans Conference that were not disparaging of, or condescending to, the fishing community; they spoke of the need to include fishermen in the discussions and decision-making for protecting the ocean and its resources.

The 16-17 June Our Oceans conference focused on “three key issues – sustainable fisheries, marine pollution, and ocean acidification...” At last, we thought, governments might get serious about pollution, but more importantly act on climate change’s predicted impacts on ocean resources and industries, including the scariest element of all the forecast impacts, that of increasing acidification.

Climate change is real. Whether you believe it’s human-caused from industrial greenhouse gas emissions or flatulent cows – namely carbon dioxide – into the atmosphere, or caused by something else such as undersea volcanoes, we’re already starting to see the effects. These include more severe weather, ocean warming, rapid melting of the Arctic icecap and sea level rise.

The most ominous impact is from the accelerating fall of pH in the ocean; what we call “ocean acidification.” The whole ocean’s acidity level has risen by roughly 30 percent, just over the past 200 years. At the present rate, it is on track to rise by 70 percent by 2050 from pre-industrial levels.

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The President’s attention to ocean issues was welcomed and it was hard to argue against much of what he was calling for, such as an end to illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing. But here is where doubt and cynicism began to roll in as we began examining each of the action items, what they entailed – and what was missing.

**New Protections for World-class Marine Areas**

Here the plan is to expand protections near the Pacific Remote Islands Marine National Monument. This proposal could make as much as 782,000 square miles off limits to fishing, and it attracted most attention from the press and big green groups such as Oceana and Ocean Conservancy. It’s also the most problematic from the standpoint of fisheries, absent a more thorough explanation, since the American waters it affects are already covered by the Magnuson-Stevens Act prohibiting overfishing. No explanation was given about what threats, such as deep sea mining or oil and gas development, might warrant creation of an enlarged MPA. Absent any real threat, however, this proposed action can be explained only by the fact that there will be no objection from any of the powerful lobbies in DC, just from some fishermen in the distant Pacific losing their fishing grounds.

MPAs, remember, are largely useless against acidification. Pollution can exacerbate acidification, but here again nothing was being said about any type of pollution threat in the distant Pacific. Moreover, claims of MPAs increasing “resilience” against acidification are dubious. Besides, why should fishermen fishing sustainably suffer economically because of the actions of others, namely the coal and oil industries?

**Combating Black Market Fishing and Supporting Fishermen**

This is a laudable action. The President said he would establish an IUU Task Force. Of course, the US is already a signatory to the UN Food & Agriculture Organization’s “Agreement on Port State Measures to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing.” So we’re just committing to do what’s already been agreed to.

There was a commitment to end seafood fraud. That’s good, but a little late. PCFFA was arguing for better labeling of seafood – correct names of fish, where it was from and how it was caught – more than 35 years ago in a California measure carried by then Senator Barry Keene, the first Chair of the Legislature’s Joint Committee on Fisheries & Aquaculture. What we have here now is a commitment to end an already illegal practice, not a substantive new action to protect our oceans or fisheries.

**Establishing a Pathway to New Marine Sanctuaries**

This action was a way for the Administration to get around Congressional objections – mainly from the House Natural Resources Committee – to the creation of new National Marine Sanctuaries. It’s much harder to object to a democratized nomination process. This is a mixed bag for fishermen who have had very good relations with some of the sanctuaries and very bad ones with others.

The biggest unresolved issue with the sanctuaries has been with fisheries management and whether the sanctuaries work through existing fishing authorities or try to assert fishing authority for themselves. The proposed public nomination process could open itself to mischief if it’s taken over by Big Green campaigners using political pressure rather than science, much as what happened in California’s Marine Life Protection Act Initiative, to push their agenda.

**Meeting Diverse Coastal Needs with Regional Marine Planning**

We don’t quibble with the concept of marine planning – the idea originally introduced to the US in the President’s National Ocean Policy in 2009. The problem is, are there planners that will “just say no” to some potentially harmful ocean activities, such as new oil and gas drilling, deep sea mining, or finfish aquaculture, or will they simply accommodate these activities, encroaching on fishing and impacting on fish stocks far beyond their permitted footprint, in some form of grand zoning scheme?

**Understanding the Impacts of Ocean Acidification**

We already have some idea of what types of impacts to expect from acidification. What is needed, but missing in the President’s proposed actions, is the science – particularly the funding – to help us adapt to increasing acidification. That is going to be the real challenge.

**$102 Million to Build Resilience in Coastal Communities**

Once again America tries to do it on the cheap. The amounts needed to build coastal resilience are in billions, not millions, of dollars. To put in perspective the amount proposed by the Administration for “building coastal resilience,” this is less than about 32 cents per U.S. citizen – a very slender investment indeed, given the magnitude of the potential harms.

**Bolstering Domestic Shellfish Aquaculture**

The Administration has bought into the permitting “Boogey Man,” spread by some aquaculture advocates convinced that local and state government regulations are standing in the way of a booming shellfish mariculture industry. The big problem is there are not that many suitable areas for shellfish mariculture. Second, US labor and other costs mean American mariculture and aquaculture operations are seldom competitive with foreign imports with much lower costs – mostly due to their fairly egregious labor and environmental standards.

A better course might be to help facilitate land-based operations and provide American producers some protection in the marketplace from nations with bad labor practices, or poor sanitary standards and environmental protections.

**National Strategic Plan for Federal Aquaculture Research**

We recognize aquaculture will be...
called upon increasingly to supplement wild fish production. Two big issues facing aquaculture development are disease and development of environmentally sustainable food sources. For that reason, proposing a strategic plan just for research seems questionable. The bigger issue is what is our nation’s vision for aquaculture? Here the problem lies with both NOAA and much of the industry.

NOAA is still pushing open-ocean finfish farms that are fraught with problems. Added to that, the aquaculture industry is enamored with genetically-engineered soy and other GMOs as a replacement for wild fish sourced feed, even though algae, insect-based, and agricultural waste product sourced feeds are far more promising environmentally. Rather than a strategic plan for research, let’s develop a vision for the kind of aquaculture we want – environmentally friendly, healthful and nutritious food, which compliments and supplements wild fish production.

What Needs Doing

In short, some of the President’s proposed actions have merit and others are dubious. But even the actions having merit, such as ending IUU fishing and stopping seafood fraud, are really nothing more that policies we’ve already agreed on. These are not the bold, substantive actions needed, given the gravity of the crisis facing our fisheries from acidification and other impacts predicted from climate change. Here are three things that need doing now:

Staying the MSA Course

The US, following the 1996 and 2006 amendments to the Magnuson-Stevens Act (MSA), has halted overfishing, and is now rebuilding its fish stocks, basing fishery management on science and working on ecosystem-based management plans that could be extremely helpful in dealing with climate change impacts in the future. We need to stay on that course.

Creating a Fishery Science Fund

It’s time for Congress to get over its anti-tax and anti-government snit and let us develop a Trust Fund to support the fisheries science we need now, and to better understand and adapt to climate change. Eleven years ago this month, we proposed creation of a National Fishery Trust Fund. With ocean acidification and other threats now looming, it’s time is overdue.

Setting a Course for a Brighter Future

What the President could do most for those of us concerned with the ocean and its fish is spell out a plan for addressing the changing climate.

In the fishing industry we’re already seeing negative impacts from climate change. That includes more severe storms in the Bering Sea, diminished shellfish production along the Pacific Coast from acidification, and the northward shift of cod populations in the Atlantic. It’s here. We deserve more than feel-good MPAs out in the Western Pacific or get-tough pronouncements on IUU fishing and seafood fraud. Like it or not, this is our ocean too.

Let’s see some real action.

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