



MOBILE REGISTER

Congress takes arms against sea of troubles

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Some members of Congress should be commended for responding constructively to a rising tide of evidence that the world's seas are in declining health.

For several years now, the Register has editorialized intermittently that lawmakers should pay heed to the increasingly worrisome warning signs of oceanic distress.

Nature magazine, U.S. News & World Report, a Smithsonian-affiliated researcher named Richard Ellis, University of British Columbia biologist Daniel Pauly, a commission backed by the Pew Charitable Trusts and a commission appointed by President George W. Bush all have reported in the past two years that the oceans are in "serious trouble" (to use the words of the presidential commission).

They have reported, for instance, that there has been a 90 percent decline in stocks of large predator fish off U.S. coastlines, and that more than 70 percent of commercial fish stocks "are now considered fully exploited, overfished or collapsed."

Other shocking statistics abound -- such as the decline of abalones off the coast of Baja, Calif., from 4,000 per acre 50 years ago to only one per acre today. And large "dead zones" mar part of the Gulf of Mexico, the Chesapeake Bay and even Mobile Bay.

Obviously, something needs to be done to try to reverse these trends.

A bipartisan group in Congress, led by Democratic U.S. Sen. Barbara Boxer of California, has now filed legislation to address these issues. The bill -- much of it based on recommendations of the two blue-ribbon commissions -- is a mixed bag of good ideas and not-so-good ones, but the overall thrust of it deserves to be well received and favorably acted upon.

Even better, Sen. Boxer is not taking an "all-or-nothing" approach. She said she is willing to take what she can get, meaning that she will welcome passage of portions of the bill even if some other parts of it don't pass muster. What this means is that the better ideas can be implemented quickly, even if more controversial or misguided proposals fall by the wayside.

Among the proposals that deserve quick approval are one that would create a council charged with protecting the oceans, one that would authorize grants to local communities to restore nearby fisheries, and one that would provide money to local governments to reduce marine pollution.

Also probably worthy of quick action is a measure to create "coral management areas" to protect reefs from degradation.

Other proposals that sound like heavy-handed regulatory measures may or may not be wise. Congress ought to go more slowly on those, with the knowledge that sometimes incentives can be both more effective and more fair to other interests than can regulatory regimes.

Still, the importance of the basic mission cannot be overstated. The waters of the world, far more than the great land masses, are the cradles of this planet's life and are most vital to the continuing health of the

Earth's global ecosystem.

"There's not much we can rally around," said the decidedly liberal Sen. Boxer, referring to the partisan divide in Washington to which she herself is a big contributor. "But one would hope that we can rally around saving our oceans."

Indeed.

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