

Text of *New York Times* Editorial:  
“Troubled Seas”

January 7, 2002

Two recent articles in reputable scientific journals illuminate the paradox of the oceans - their fragility on the one hand, their capacity for regeneration on the other. They also speak to the course that Washington must take to prevent the further deterioration of our marine environment.

One article, in *Nature*, reported that global fish stocks were in even worse shape than previously reported. The reason is that Chinese officials whose careers depended on meeting targets had been exaggerating the catches of China's fishermen and reporting the inflated figures to the United Nations. The figures implied that there were far more fish in the sea than actually exist.

The second article, in *Science*, was decidedly more upbeat. It reported that two small marine reserves that had been closed to fishing - one off the coast of Florida, the other in the Caribbean - produced dramatically increased catches in surrounding waters. For obvious reasons, no-fishing zones are more popular among marine biologists than among commercial fishermen and their political allies. The fact that they can also serve as sheltered nurseries for surrounding waters may enhance their reputation. But the larger point of the piece is that however depressing the overall statistics, there are ways to make things better.

Stripped of the camouflage provided by China's overreporting, the numbers show that most commercial fish continue to decline. The main culprit is overfishing by highly mechanized and heavily subsidized fleets, but other factors - agricultural and municipal pollution, the destruction of the wetlands that serve as incubators for many species - have also contributed to the problem.

The oceans have also suffered from political indifference. Bill Clinton turned out to be an effective environmentalist, and his administration took important steps to arrest the alarming decline in swordfish. But it was not until the end of his tenure, when he established a huge protected area off the Hawaiian coast and another off the Florida Keys, that he showed any real interest in marine issues.

President Bush will have no shortage of advice should he choose to move forward. It has been 30 years since the United States last conducted a top- to-bottom review of ocean policy. In 1969, a report from the Congressionally authorized Stratton Commission led to the creation of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) and the 200-mile fishing limit that protects American waters from overfishing by foreign fleets, though not, as it turned out, by American fleets. At the moment, two new commissions are at work. A Congressionally authorized group is finally under way but will not report until 2003. A private commission underwritten by the Pew Foundation has already held

extensive hearings and published reports on coastal pollution, invasive species and fish farming.

The Pew Commission, which is led by Leon Panetta, the former Clinton chief of staff, and includes commercial fishermen, political leaders and eminent marine biologists, will report next fall. Even before then there are obvious steps Mr. Bush could be thinking about. One is to ask the Environmental Protection Agency to find ways to control polluted runoff from sources like farms and city streets. This is the biggest single threat to the nation's estuaries, and is largely responsible for a fishless "dead zone" in the Gulf of Mexico.

Another task (and one that might appeal to Mr. Bush's interest in tidier government) is to consolidate the various agencies that deal with the oceans and fish, giving them greater visibility and influence. The most important agency - the National Marine Fisheries Service - is lodged in the Department of Commerce, where nobody pays it much attention. A third task will be to redraw the Magnuson Act, the basic law governing federal fisheries policy. The law now gives eight regional councils and Commerce joint responsibility for developing strategies to rebuild fish populations. Despite unchallenged historical evidence that disciplined conservation can quickly restore species to good health, the councils have dragged their feet and the department hasn't pushed them. One early test of the administration's interest will be its forthcoming decision on limiting takes of Atlantic codfish, which are slowly beginning to revive but still need more protection than some regional fishing interests are willing to give them.

Making progress will require Mr. Bush to do things he has shown no appetite for, such as asserting federal power where states and regional institutions have failed and risking political capital with constituencies like farmers and developers. But it is one field where no other president has made a clear mark, and where some simple, low-cost measures can make a world of difference.