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Editorial

Oceans at Risk

There is no shortage of scientific studies documenting the degradation of the world's oceans, the decline of marine ecosystems and the collapse of important fish species. Several have appeared in the last month. What is in short supply is a sustained effort by world governments and other institutions to do something about it.

Last month, a team of American, British and Canadian researchers concluded that not a single square foot of ocean had been left untouched by modern society, and that humans had fouled 41 percent of the seas with polluted runoff, overfishing and other abuses.

A narrower but no less scary study from the University of Oregon found that a dead zone off the Oregon coast had spread south to California and north to Washington and devastated marine life in one of the world's most productive fisheries. The culprit is believed to be global warming, which has changed the interaction between wind and sea in ways that rob the fish of oxygen.

A third study is the latest legislative report card from the Joint Ocean Commission Initiative, established to push Congress and the administration to do a better job of protecting America's waters and to play a more active role globally. Washington policy makers get no grade higher than a "C" in any category, ranging from financing for scientific research to fisheries management.

The United States has to do better but so, too, must the rest of the world. A case can be made that the United States has been more sensitive to ocean issues than other major fishing nations, including Japan and the maritime members of the European Union. The problems are global and so, in the end, are the solutions.

The United Nations could do far more. Successful in banning huge drift nets, it has made few inroads on bottom trawling, a ruthless form of industrial fishing. And it has gone nowhere in its effort to persuade Japan and the European Union to stop their assault on the world's shark populations, which have been decimated beyond belief. The World Trade Organization could also usefully limit the huge government subsidies that allow most of the world's industrial fleets to stay afloat.

Last year, President Bush, who is weak on many environmental issues, created one of the largest protected marine reserves in the world — 138,000 square miles of largely unspoiled reefs and shoals near Hawaii. He should replicate that achievement elsewhere in American waters and persuade other leaders to do the same.

And he must keep the pressure on Congress to approve, finally, the Law of the Sea. Without that approval, the United States will have no voice when decisions are made about rights of passage, exploring the ocean floor and fishing. The United States should have that voice, and the rest of the world needs to hear it.