

Getting help from the press

Blurring the lines of national coverage

By Nancy Gaines
Special to the Times

For five days, esteemed scientists and elite journalists gathered on Bonaire in the Netherlands Antilles, east of Aruba, to loll on the island's fine beaches, sip cocktails at the Topsy Seagull and perhaps marvel at the flamingoes for which Bonaire is famous.

The official purpose of the October 2002 gathering of the Pew Charitable Trusts marine fellows was to train the scientists in the ways of the media, the better to market their message.

"Learn how to navigate the stormy waters of the media," read the description of one Bonaire workshop. "Packaging your message is a key to success — whether talking to the media, submitting a paper to Science or Nature (magazine), writing a grant proposal, or writing an op-ed for your local paper."

But it wasn't all business.

The workshops were followed by "barside discussions" as the sun-soaked setting blurred the line that usually separates reporters and those they cover. So, too, did it blur the line between trainers and trainees.

The scientists being trained on Bonaire had a ready pool of journalists on which to practice what they were learning about working the media. The list of reporters invited to Bonaire was a who's who of science journalism: Cornelia Dean of the New York Times, Natasha Loder of the Economist, Charles Alexander of Time magazine and Tom Hayden of U.S. News and World Report, among others.

Dean told the Gloucester Daily Times her trip to Bonaire was paid for by Pew, the powerful nonprofit that uses its multi-billion-dollar endowment to steer public policy on the environment and other issues.

While the New York Times has strict standards against junkets, Dean said, an exception is made for "teaching," and that's what she was doing in Bonaire.

"My goal was to help scientists to speak more clearly to the public," she said.

The scientists mingling with the journalists on Bonaire included beneficiaries of Pew money, like Steve Palumbi, Elliot Norse and Jeremy Jackson.

Another notable scientist on Bonaire was Daniel Pauly, the author last year of "Aquacalypse Now: The End of Fish," and a professor whose fisheries center at the University of British Columbia has received some \$15 million from Pew.

Pauly is a longtime prophet of doom for commercial fishing.

In a 1998 article he co-authored for Science magazine, Pauly predicted that rapacious commercial fishermen would work their way down the marine food chain — eliminating predator fish such as tuna and swordfish, then setting their nets for the bait those fish feed on. In the end, nothing would be left on the menu but "jellyfish and plankton soup."

'Fished Out'

The Bonaire conclave is just one example of the symbiotic relationship that has developed between environmental advocates and scientists and some of the

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big-media journalists who cover them.

The journalists are wined and dined by the advocates and hired to train the scientists to use the media to advance their message.

The journalists, in turn, call on those same scientists as sources when writing about the advocates and their agenda.

In June 2003, eight months after Bonaire, Tom Hayden warned of the cataclysmic consequences of overfishing in a cover story for U.S. News and World Report,

The story, "Fished Out," quoted 13 different concerned scientists and citizens coming to the same awful conclusion: Jellyfish might one day be fishermen's only catch.

Although Hayden was virtually unknown in commercial fishing circles, his story had the potential to influence the American public's view of the fishing industry.

Hayden did not mention to his readers that, of the 14 sources he quoted for the article, 13 received their funding directly or indirectly from Pew, as Pew fellows or the recipients of Pew grants. The 14th was a restaurant chef.

Hayden's Pew-connected sources included Pauly, the godfather of the jellyfish scenario, and Jeremy Jackson, a Scripps Institution of Oceanography ecologist.

Both Pauly and Jackson were on Bonaire with Hayden, who did not return several messages for comment on this story.

In fact, Jackson was on the agenda to go snorkeling with Hayden. Hayden's U.S. News and World Report cover story quoted Jackson on jellyfish:

"Jellyfish have become a commercial fishery in many places," Jackson says, "because that's all that's left. That and the bacteria."

Hayden also quoted Jane Lubchenco, now head of the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the parent agency of the National Marine Fisheries Service.

'Frame their messages'

Lubchenco, a Pew fellow and mentor of many other Pew fellows, wasn't on Bonaire. But she appeared in a PBS-produced film shown at the event titled "Empty Oceans, Empty Nets," another cautionary tale of overfishing, funded in part by Pew.

Lubchenco for years has urged her fellow scientists to become activists in the debate over issues like global warming and overfishing and to help shape public policy through the media.

In 1997, as president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science, Lubchenco called on fellow scientists to join her in a new "social contract."

Scientists must promote their ideas to politicians and the public in order to create a world that is "ecologically sound, economically feasible and socially just," she argued.

A year after the speech, Lubchenco founded the Aldo Leopold Leadership Program to advance her activist vision.

The program trains chosen scientists in "talking points" to use with the media and other nonscientific audiences, according to its website. Through "role playing and small group interactive exercises," the scientists learn how to develop "specific, appropriate messages to stakeholders."

Trainers hired to work with Aldo Leopold fellows have included reporters for the New York Times, the Washington Post and National Public Radio, as well as leaders of environmental groups and White House and congressional staff members.

Lubchenco also helped organize two groups with a similar mission, SeaWeb and the Communication Partnership for Science and the Sea — COMPASS.

Lead trainer for all three advocacy groups — Aldo Leopold, SeaWeb and COMPASS — is Nancy Baron, a zoologist and former science writer.

Baron has boasted to colleagues about her success in manipulating the media message — and the media.

In a 2005 e-mail — a copy of which has been obtained by the Times — she cited an article in The New York Times, and wrote: "We

White_Rose 1 week ago

muddog liked this

Bravo the the GDT for exposing what has been behind the curtain of "environmental" journalism as it pertains to US commercial fishing, tony elitist advocates masquerading as reporters, who carried on without a whit of actual J-school hard knuckle reporting where the first rule is always to check one's sources. Instead, corrupted by Big Green \$ and "status" they blindly accepted or willingly colluded and proceeded to lie to the American people. Classically sad tale of how fame and power corrupts.

Like Reply

Phil Ramsey 1 week ago

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The official purpose of the October 2002 gathering of the Pew Charitable Trusts marine fellows was to train the scientists in the ways of the media, the better to market their message.

This was in 2002, or is that a typo?

If this story is in 2002, alot has changed from that time, and again some of it hasn't.

Not so unusual to hold meetings in places like Bonaire, plenty of cooperations do this

My problem is what about Today, what's happening today
This is The Gloucester DAILY TIMES, not the Gloucester Yesterday Times

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worked with these scientists to help them frame their messages and talk about their study so it resonates with the wider public. Note their quotes in particular which are not just off the top of their heads ..."

In 2008, referring to a story on damage to the ocean ecosystem written by Andrew Revkin for the Science Times section of The New York Times, Baron wrote: "This Science Times piece came out of AAAS (American Academy of Arts and Sciences) and our infamous marine mixer."

The infamous mixer was a cocktail party's hosted by COMPASS for members of the Academy and the press.

The networking that links activists and journalists was fully on display in the Washington Post story that broke the news of President-elect Obama's decision to nominate Lubchenco as head of NOAA in December 2008.

The story was written by the Post's environmental writer, Juliet Eilperin, who has been both a panelist and participant in COMPASS events.

Eilperin cited "several sources" for the scoop and quoted one in praise of Lubchenco: Andrew Rosenberg.

The story did not mention that Rosenberg is an adviser to both Pew and COMPASS and has ties to Lubchenco that date to when she was a professor and he a grad student at Oregon State University. He lists Lubchenco as a reference on his resume.

Rosenberg is also a former high-ranking NOAA official who now runs an environmental consulting company that has obtained more than \$12 million in NOAA contracts in the past decade.

Last fall, Lubchenco made him a White House consultant on ocean policy.

Nancy Gaines has been editor of two newspaper chains and four magazines, including the Improper Bostonian. She was founding editor of the Boston Business Journal and has reported for The New York Times and Boston Globe. She is now a publishing consultant and special projects writer. She lives in Gloucester, and is married to Times staff writer Richard Gaines.