

More must be done to protect ocean

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Sometimes, an obvious answer to a perplexing problem can occur right on one's doorstep. As California sets forth on charting a new course for ocean conservation, we Oregonians have much to do and much to learn about solving the problem of our declining fisheries and degraded marine habitat. California's solution -- a network of marine protected areas down their entire coastline -- is one that would sustain our Oregon ocean for generations to come.

We've been inundated recently with bad news about our beloved ocean. Two distinguished panels of experts, including the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, recently concluded that our oceans are severely threatened and in need of urgent reforms.

Just as California's diverse populations of groundfish, giant sea bass and abalone have collapsed, Oregon's commercial groundfish industry has borne unprecedented losses -- losing almost half its value within the last decade. With boat buy-backs and fisheries closures a frequent sight, our salmon industry has gone from being a quarter-billion-dollar powerhouse to a \$12 million cottage industry.

Here's where looking to what other states have done to conserve marine ecosystems will give us hope. Scientists tell us that when underwater areas are set aside to protect marine life, the fish in those areas thrive. Soon the California Fish & Game Commission will vote into law a network of marine protected areas on California's central coast. The proposal will be based on sound science and public involvement. This will be followed by the designation of marine protected area networks to their northern and southern state borders.

The marine protected areas placed in Oregon would help bring our depleted ocean back to health, and as a result, jump-start new prosperity in our coastal communities. Marine protected areas are places where fish and wildlife can be given relief from human impacts. Scientific studies of marine reserves show species doubling their population size and growing 30 percent larger than those outside marine reserves. These areas, over time, would produce longer-living, larger and more fertile fish, and give much-needed relief to our overworked oceans. A carefully managed conservation plan would not only result in a benefit to our marine ecosystems, but also a commercial benefit with stable, diverse fisheries, the bedrock of our coastal fishing communities.

Public education is essential to ensuring that our ocean conservation efforts are well-understood and inclusive. That's why on Tuesday I'm moderating a discussion with the public, fishermen, conservationists and scientists at Willamette University following a screening of the film "Common Ground," which highlights the unique challenges facing Oregon's marine ecosystem.

Oregon, the state that led the nation in creating public beaches and oceanside state parks, should show this same foresight with our

If you go

"Common Ground" will be screened at 6:30 p.m. Tuesday at Smith Auditorium, Willamette University. Discussion will follow. Free. Information: www.oceansonline.org.

"underwater parks." This week's film and discussion will be a great time to talk about how marine protected areas can help us be responsible stewards of our ocean's wealth for this and future generations.

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