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Following California  
A Register-Guard Editorial  
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Once again, California is leading the way on the environment, creating the largest network of marine reserves in the continental United States. And once again, Oregon should follow California's bold example.

The idea of following the Golden State's lead on the environment may strike some longtime Oregonians as strange, even a bit galling. Just a few decades ago Oregon was carrying the banner at the front of the green parade with innovations such as its beach law, bottle bill and land use system.

But that's ancient history. Now, California has become the most environmentally progressive state in the country, with groundbreaking initiatives such as last year's move to reduce greenhouse-gas emissions across every sector of the economy.

Now, California has moved forward with another huge environmental initiative, approving a network of 29 marine protected areas where fishing is either banned or sharply restricted in near-shore ocean waters stretching from Santa Barbara to San Mateo counties. The refuge program, which eventually will span the entire coast, is designed to revive many of the West Coast's most severely depleted fish stocks.

Marine reserves aren't a new idea in Oregon, although the concept has yet to move beyond the talk and study stages. Seven years ago, Gov. John Kitzhaber directed a task force made up of state agencies, environmentalists and fishermen to study the idea. The group recommended creation of a limited network that would assess their long-term effectiveness in restoring depleted species.

Last year Gov. Ted Kulongoski proposed converting the state's entire coastline into a national marine sanctuary, an idea that remains under consideration. The plan, which would leave commercial and recreational fishing under the control of the Pacific Fishery Management Council, would extend state jurisdiction, which currently runs just three nautical miles from the beach, to cover the continental shelf, a distance averaging 25 miles. It's unclear whether Kulongoski's proposal would include zones that ban or limit fishing.

Kulongoski also joined the governors of California and Washington in forming a regional initiative to oppose any plans to allow oil and gas leasing, development and exploration of the West Coast. The three states also agreed to set goals for cleaning up coastal waters and beaches, protecting coastal habitats, enhancing economic development in coastal communities and developing a regional plan for coastal research.

Those are all worthy goals. But Oregon should follow California's example by creating a network of reserves to protect fish populations before it's too late. Decades of overfishing and federal mismanagement have depleted some species by as much as 95 percent, and studies have shown marine reserves allow some species to rebound in a surprisingly short period of time.

If Oregon officials are looking for homegrown motivation, they need only look to their state's own visionary land use plan, approved in 1973. Goal 19 requires the state "to conserve marine resources and ecological functions for the purposes of providing long-term ecological, economic and social value and benefit to future generations."

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