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An idea whose time has come

Marine reserves should be studied as ways to manage the ecosystem

From dams that wrecked salmon runs to rock-fish restrictions that some regard as being unsupported by the facts, government actions have for decades given coastal residents no reason to cheer. It's no wonder Gov. Ted Kulongoski's marine reserve plan has met with reactions ranging from suspicion to outright hostility.

To the governor's credit, he ordered an extensive public outreach effort, resulting in comments from nearly 800 people along the Oregon Coast. Many expressed concern that establishing marine reserves is the result of hidden agendas.

It is easy to speculate what one such agenda might be, since curtailing or eliminating fishing - especially commercial fishing - has long been an overt part of political discussions. How much easier life would be for hydropower operators and others if they could operate without needing to maintain sufficient stocks to support fishing seasons.

The governor wants the Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council to recommend up to nine marine reserves by November, sites that will be closed to fishing and other forms of human exploitation. Coastal residents wonder what having such a reserve in their neighborhood will mean in terms of lost opportunities.

These concerns are valid. Coastal communities can't thrive based solely on vacation homes, seasonal tourism and pretty views.

At the same time, marine reserves aren't the product of the governor's wild imagination. Though detailed scientific data concerning their long-term benefits and costs is still being gathered, results so far suggest properly designed and managed reserves are perhaps the best available means of making sure that coastal ecosystems thrive. Only by ensuring the survival of the ocean's complex web of life can we have any real hope of bequeathing healthy fisheries to our children and grandchildren.

In 2003, two blue-ribbon commissions examined the health of America's oceans and found ample reasons for great concern. Over-exploitation of some species, pollution, human population growth and other hazards are seriously impacting these waters. The independent Pew Oceans Commission was particularly enthusiastic about the potential benefits of marine reserves. (See www.pewtrusts.org)

"Networks of fully protected marine reserves are the best-understood tool for managing marine ecosystems," the Pew commission concluded. They protect against generalized over fishing and against over-targeting of specific species in ways that unbalance the food chain, and reduce net-related damage to sensitive natural structures on the ocean bottom. At the same time, rebounding fish stocks spill over into unprotected areas where fishing remains open.

Good ideas though they may be, questions must be answered regarding the state's long-term commitment to running reserves in ways that fairly allocate impacts. One governor's assurances aren't enough: coastal communities deserve a contract that sets forth what we are receiving in return for the sacrifices being demanded.

Marine reserves, like them or not, are an idea whose time has arrived. We need to advocate for ourselves, making sure that the ocean's hereditary stewards here on this coast play a key role in shaping the future.