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Newsday

Newsday (New York)

January 14, 2010 Thursday
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Taking too much out; putting too much in; That's the classic problem with how we treat our oceans; a unified policy will help

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SECTION: OPINION; Pg. A33

LENGTH: 641 words

I grew up a Brooklyn boy, drawn to my coastline from the very start. Out with my dad on the boats of Sheepshead Bay. Catching snappers or nighttime crabbing from the Cross Bay Boulevard bridge. Surfcasting with my father at dawn at Jones Beach. Trolling aboard my uncles' boat off Coney Island or battling astonishing bluefin tuna off Sandy Hook. All of these, heaven for a kid in my single-digit years and early teens.

Later we moved to Long Island and I fished the shores and bays. Later still I did my graduate studies in New York waters, studying seabirds - and still fishing. That's when it hit me: The ocean was the last buffalo hunt; all the fish, year after year, were declining.

Right here on Long Island, we've had severe declines in fish and shellfish populations, including some of the most valuable species caught in New York. Some are recovering, others continue declining.

Part of the reason so many of our country's fisheries - from Maine to Hawaii - are in turmoil is the confusing tangle of management hurled their way. It's not just overfishing or rates of unwanted fish discarded. It's also damaged seafloor. Lost fishing gear. Trash. Sewage. Chemical pollution. Eroding shores. Shrinking wetlands. It's taking too much out while putting too much in.

Right now, our oceans and coasts are governed by more than 140 laws and 20 different agencies, each with different goals and often conflicting mandates. There's no unifying policy or coordination. Instead, we are managing fishing one species at a time, treating fish as if they exist in a vacuum - just them and the water - when in reality fish and fishing communities rely on their ecosystem, other species, healthy habitats and clean water.

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In order to value each piece of the puzzle, we need to have the big picture in mind. You can't do that if agencies responsible for certain pieces are assembling their portion of the jigsaw puzzle on separate tables.

Fortunately, the Obama administration is working to change that. It's creating a national policy that will offer landmark (seamark?) protection for our oceans. A national ocean policy will help protect our seas and the people who depend on them - which happens to include everyone; half the oxygen you breathe is produced by ocean plankton. From collapsing fish populations and pollution, to warming temperatures and rising acidity - a national ocean policy strengthens the country's ability to tackle these challenges. This will help us rebuild struggling fisheries and keep fishermen on the water for years to come.

We require a lot from our seas - fishing, shipping, recreation, energy development, wildlife habitat. That's why, within this policy, the administration is also working to create a process to help us plan ahead. Without a system of coordination like this, we'll see escalating ocean sprawl and people at cross-purposes, with little thought given to selecting the best places for particular uses. Further stressing our already-imperiled seas jeopardizes the future of the food, jobs, and recreation they now provide.

The oceans are a huge part of our lives and our economies. New York's ocean sector industries contribute more than \$24.6 billion to the state's gross domestic product. Long Island Sound businesses alone contribute roughly \$8.5 billion a year to the regional economy through boating, fishing, swimming and tourism. As a saltwater fisherman and ocean scientist, I know firsthand that the stakes are high if we don't address the problems facing our oceans.

The Obama administration is charting the course for healthy oceans and abundant fish populations. This focus on our seas is unprecedented, and it is crucially needed. For our future, the future of our children and our grandchildren, let's all urge the administration to adopt a strong ocean policy in an executive order from the president.

LOAD-DATE: January 14, 2010

LANGUAGE: ENGLISH

GRAPHIC: PHOTO - Carl **Safina**

PUBLICATION-TYPE: Newspaper

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