

Ocean resources of the National Park System: Out of sight, out of mind, left behind

By Gary E. Davis

AMERICANS EXPECT their National Park System to comprise unimpaired resources and to exhibit values that represent the nation's heritage in superlative natural, historical, and recreational areas. More than 40 ocean parks, however, currently fail to meet these expectations. National parks afford little or no special protection to nature in the ocean, which surprises many citizens. To address this issue in 2003, ocean park superintendents and other park professionals invited staff from other agencies and organizations to draft an "Ocean Park Strategy." They identified several major issues and recommended ways to address them.

The partners included the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, U.S. Geological Survey, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, California State Parks Department, American Fisheries Society, Sport Fishing Institute, Sea Web, The Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense, National Parks Conservation Association, Wild Coast, Reef Environmental Education Foundation, Student Conservation

"States regulate ocean fishing in most national parks and do not differentiate parks from surrounding waters."

Association, Partners in Parks, and a dozen universities. To find common ground among participants and develop the strategy, the partners held six regional workshops and four topical workshops on, respectively, marine protected-area science, the political realities of ocean conservation, partnerships and public involvement in ocean conservation, and an action plan to improve coastal conservation in the national parks.

Ocean stewardship is complicated by many factors. Human-driven global forces that alter climate and sea level render concepts of *natural* and *unimpaired* difficult to grasp when considering the ocean. Pollution and invasive nonnative species also threaten ocean parks, but the effects of people removing thousands of tons of fish and other sea life from parks every year far exceed those threats. States regulate ocean fishing in most national parks and do not differentiate parks from surrounding waters. Overfishing that has depleted sea life populations throughout U.S. waters also has depleted fish and sea life in the parks. Consequently, parks have lost fishing and other recreational opportunities dependent on living ocean resources. In addition, the ecological effects of overfishing have permeated parks, dramatically altering entire ecosystems. Flattened, disturbance-adapted sea urchin

Lobster traps become lodged in coral reefs at Biscayne National Park, Florida, as a result of storms. No longer active for lobstering, they continue to trap and kill fish. Newly established reserves in parks will serve as recovery areas that allow a variety of fish and other sea life to grow large, become fecund, and help restore depleted populations.





A coral reef without large fish? Populations of snapper and grouper in national parks of the Caribbean Sea and Florida have plummeted over the past couple of decades. Advances in fishing tackle, fish-finding sonar, and the use of global

positioning systems have enabled fishers to target large fish effectively. One of the concerns of the recently drafted Ocean Park Strategy is unsustainable removal of ocean resources by humans.

barrens, algae-covered rocks, and other diminished communities have replaced diverse and productive giant kelp forests, coral reefs, and seagrass meadows in parks.

The four pillars of park stewardship—*Know, Restore, Protect, and Connect*—provide a simple way to organize the Ocean Park Strategy. As for what to know, the National Park Service needs to increase its capacity

“Overfishing that has depleted sea life populations throughout U.S. waters also has depleted fish and sea life in the parks.”

to explore and understand the ocean realms of parks and to revitalize its scientific and public safety diving program. Park stewards need to better understand ocean ecosystems and human roles in them. They need resource inventories, submarine habitat maps, monitoring, and more clearly defined ocean boundaries and jurisdictions. On land the National Park System plays an important role in national conservation strategy and policy, but in the ocean, relationships with other resource management agencies are not as clear. To restore and protect, the strategy proposes a “Restore Impaired Ocean Park Resources” initiative to address critical restoration issues and to improve park protection. Ocean parks need to assess performance of newly established marine recovery

areas in parks, develop joint fishery management plans with states, prevent extirpation of native species, and establish ocean damage assessment teams.

The critical keys to improved ocean conservation in the National Park Service are partnerships with other ocean-related agencies to facilitate cooperation, collaboration, and communication. But doing a better job of connecting people to ocean parks may be the most important task ahead. The strategy recommends that an ocean park task force coordinate these activities. Such a task force would help resolve misconceptions about the need to change traditional ocean conservation and improve communication among ocean park professionals and with the public. It would also engage artists, students, and volunteers in parks, and raise the National Park Service’s awareness about its ocean responsibilities and opportunities. The Natural Resource Challenge addresses these same kinds of stewardship issues for all parks. The Ocean Park Strategy seeks to focus ongoing Natural Resource Challenge efforts on particular common needs of ocean parks to prevent the nation’s ocean heritage from being left behind. ■

gary_davis@nps.gov

Visiting Chief Scientist, Ocean Program; Washington, D.C.