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Reports on the health of the world's oceans have a predictable monotony

"Our oceans and coasts are in trouble," said retired Admiral James D. Watkins in relation to the latest one, from the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy.

The report's finding echo earlier ones, but its power and urgency come from who wrote it. The commission members were appointed by President George W. Bush. If this commission thinks there's a problem, there's a problem.

Fixing it will require doing a better job seeing the big picture, the report argues.

The scientific big picture means ecosystem management, thinking in terms of the health of all the plant and animal life in a region. Too frequently, decisions have been made on a fish-by-fish basis, as one or another species is threatened by overfishing or loss of habitat.

The bureaucratic big picture requires consolidation of the agencies that oversee activities on or near the ocean. The report

recommends a National Ocean Council to coordinate federal ocean policy, for instance.

One recommendation is especially encouraging, coming from an administration solicitous of business. It would require regional fisheries management councils, which set fishing limits, to base the allowable catch on scientific studies.

The councils have been dominated by commercial and sport fishing interests. One way to change them is to appoint different members.

Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger has made a small start. One of his three nominees for a spot on the Pacific Fisheries Council is Kate Wing, a conservationist. Donald Evans, U.S. secretary of commerce, will choose among the three.

The message from the president's own ocean commission is clear. Exploitation has degraded the oceans. Conservation can restore them.