

April 25, 2004

# St. Petersburg Times

## Troubled waters

**A**s problems go, this is as big as they get. The world's oceans are in trouble, and that means we are in trouble.

After 21/2 years of research, the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy has issued a preliminary report that should get our attention. "Pollution, depletion of fish and other living marine resources, habitat destruction and degradation, and the introduction of invasive non-native species are just some of the ways people harm the oceans, with serious consequences for the entire planet," it begins.

And there isn't much time to respond. "We know if we don't get moving now, in 10 years we may not be able to recover," said commission chairman James Watkins, a retired Navy admiral. So the next decade is critical.

Our oceans are particularly threatened by overfishing, booming coastal development and pollution of waterways. So much farm waste flows into the Mississippi River that a "dead zone" the size of New Jersey has formed in the Gulf of Mexico where the river empties. Yet when it comes to responding to such threats, ocean management is fragmented among 20 federal agencies. The commission report recommends consolidation under a National Ocean Council, whose leader would be given the status of assistant to the president. More effort should be put into education, as well, so that future generations will be ready to meet the challenges.

Ocean policy should be based on "unbiased,

credible and up-to-date scientific information" rather than politics, the report stated. A good example of where we go wrong involves fishing limits, which are set by regional fishery management councils dominated by the fishing industry. Consequently, whole species of food fish have been decimated.

The commission has surprised some observers with the strength of its recommendations, because it is a conservative group picked by the Bush administration. Yet its findings weren't substantially different from those of a privately funded organization - the Pew Oceans Commission - that counted more environmentalists among its members. "We now have two commissions identifying the same problems in the ocean that need to be fixed," said Leon Panetta, chairman of the Pew commission.

Of course any action on the report will be up to President Bush and Congress, and it would be out of character if either acts forcefully on the recommendations. The president has consistently weakened environmental regulation, and Congress would have to fund the effort (at an estimated cost of \$3-billion) at a time it is busy plunging the federal budget deeper into a sea of red with tax cuts and reckless spending.

Yet the warnings couldn't be more clear. Our oceans - which we rely on for food production, recreation, scientific research, psychic renewal and perhaps existence itself - are in peril.