

TURNING THE TIDE

Charting a Course to Improve the Effectiveness
of Public Advocacy for the Oceans

FINAL REPORT

October 2003

David Wilmot, Ph.D. • Jack K. Sterne, J.D.

Contributors: Kim Haddow, Elizabeth Sullivan

Report to the
David and Lucile Packard Foundation
Oak Foundation
Curtis and Edith Munson Foundation

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CONTENTS

Executive Summary	4
A Moment in Time.....	4
A Search for Solutions	5
A Rising Tide.....	6
Specific Recommendations.....	10
A New Challenge.....	14
Background	15
State of the Oceans.....	15
State of the Ocean Conservation Community.....	16
A Search for Solutions.....	20
Hallmarks of Success	22
Instruments of Success.....	22
Designing a Winning Strategy.....	32
Organizational Case Studies	34
National Rifle Association: <i>A Laser-Like Focus Zeroes in on Success</i>	36
MoveOn.org: <i>The Internet as a Political Force</i>	37
Aircraft Owners and Pilots Association: <i>Professionalism and Member Services Make This Organization Soar</i>	38
American Federation of Government Employees: <i>A Powerful Entity within a Larger Powerhouse</i>	39
Americans for Tax Reform: <i>Using Alliances to Roll Back the Twentieth Century</i>	39
Sierra Club: <i>Grassroots: Media and Political Involvement Equals Influence</i>	40
League of Conservation Voters: <i>Bringing Together Environmental Groups for a Greater Political Voice</i>	41
Chesapeake Bay Foundation: <i>Turning a Beloved Natural Treasure into Political Power</i>	42
U.S. Public Interest Research Group: <i>Research and Grassroots: Powerful Political Weapons</i> ..	43
Coastal Conservation Association: <i>Coordinated Campaigns Give Clout to Recreational Fishermen</i>	43

Recreational Fishing Alliance: <i>Angling for Success by Working Capitol Hill</i>	44
At-Sea Processors Association: <i>Strategic Alliances Diffuse Opposition</i>	45
National Fisheries Institute: <i>Cultivating Champions From the Inside Out</i>	45
How the Ocean Conservation Community Measures Up	47
Capacities and Skills of the Ocean Conservation Community.....	48
Underdeveloped Areas.....	52
Non-Existent Areas – Electoral Politics.....	61
The Big Picture – Campaign Focus Is Lacking.....	63
Recommendations and Conclusions	64
Coordinated Campaigns & Strategic Alliances.....	65
Message, Message, and More Message.....	69
Time to Build a Constituency for the Oceans.....	70
Enhancing Effectiveness of Lobbying.....	73
Electoral Politics Is the Keystone.....	76
Scientific Information Is Important, But It Is Not Enough.....	78
Litigation Must Be Strategic.....	80
Funding and Fundraising Must Evolve.....	80
Conclusion.....	81
Appendices	83
Appendix I. Trends in Tax-Exempt Organizations.....	83
Appendix II: Non-Environmental Organizations.....	85
Appendix III: Environmental Organizations.....	98
Appendix IV: Fishing Organizations.....	108
Appendix V. Ocean Conservation Organizations Interviewed.....	116
Appendix VI. References.....	117
Appendix VII. Acknowledgements.....	119
Appendix VIII. About The Authors.....	120

Executive Summary

A Moment in Time

Over the last year, a number of ocean reports and studies have presented details about the alarming decline of the oceans' largest predatory fishes, the growing threat of global climate change and its impacts on coral reefs, and a general failure of current ocean management practices, among other ocean ills. "America's oceans are in crisis," declared the national report, *America's Living Oceans: Charting a Course for Sea Change* by the independent Pew Oceans Commission, which detailed the state of our seas.¹ While many concede that America's oceans are in crisis, ocean conservationists lack the political power to achieve the essential reforms that are necessary to turn the tide and create what *America's Living Oceans* calls "a fundamental change in the nation's posture toward its oceans."²

Advancing public policy changes that will replace failed management systems and restore healthy, thriving oceans rests largely in the hands of the ocean conservation community. This community has dramatically increased its profile over the last 20 years, securing important conservation victories resulting in a significant increase in the level of environmental protection for the oceans. However, the pace of conservation victories has slowed substantially, even as ocean threats continue to grow and opponents of conservation organize themselves. Overall, the tide is ebbing and threatens to strand conservation organizations far from their public policy objective of healthy and productive oceans. There is widespread agreement, in and out of the advocacy community, that the ocean conservation community could be more effective.

"Getting Americans involved in protecting the oceans is one of our greatest challenges." – The Honorable Leon Panetta, Former Chief of Staff in the Clinton Administration and Chairman of the Pew Oceans Commission

A Search for Solutions

The need for more effective advocacy on behalf of the oceans is both urgent and timely, but how best to proceed? To answer this important question, this study set out to identify the “hallmarks of success” of successful and noteworthy public advocacy organizations. These are organizations that are consistently able to get and keep the attention of relevant decision-makers. While they do not win every policy battle, they win enough that they cannot be ignored.

In identifying these hallmarks, we began with the hypothesis that successful organizations must employ a specific set of identifiable tools that lead to success. Our hypothesis proved correct. Through in-depth research on, and interviews with, a representative cross-section of environmental, non-environmental and fishing public advocacy organizations, we determined that successful organizations almost universally employ the same specific set of tools or strategic elements. We identified these eight hallmarks of success as: communications, grassroots support, lobbying, electoral politics, strategic alliances, research, fundraising, and litigation. While not every organization uses every element in all circumstances, or the same proportion of elements, they all use most of them, and they use them well.

Not only do successful organizations use these elements well, but *how* they use them is equally important. Successful organizations almost universally operate from campaign mode, meaning that the elements of their advocacy – communications, grassroots support, lobbying, electoral politics – are all integrated into a strategic plan that anticipates both setbacks and victories. This coordinated campaigning gives these organizations the type of discipline, flexibility, and focus that leads to success.

Interestingly, a common current running throughout these organizations, and the strategies they employ, involves the importance of cultivating and maintaining high quality relationships – with the media, their grassroots supporters, their congressional delegations, their strategic partners, and with their funding sources. Successful organizations understand the importance of people and their relationships with them, and they pour enormous resources into forming and strengthening these connections.

Having identified the keys to success as part of our study, we then evaluated the ocean conservation community with respect to the hallmarks, and developed recommendations that the ocean conservation community could follow to become more effective.

A Rising Tide

Our conclusions and recommendations chart a new course in ocean advocacy. We begin with the recognition that ocean conservation organizations and the community at-large need to be more effective to take on current challenges and advance urgently needed initiatives, such as the ocean governance reforms called for in *America's Living Oceans*, and reauthorization of the Magnuson-Stevens Act. We conclude that ocean conservation organizations need to increase their strength and build new relationships by expanding their capacities in underdeveloped, or non-existent areas. We are confident that, if the ocean conservation community follows these recommendations, it will soon find itself riding a rising tide of effectiveness to public policy success.

Three Priorities for Progress

While this report makes recommendations in a number of areas, our analysis reveals that there are three overarching priority areas that deserve special attention. These three priorities are:

- (1) participating fully in the political process;
- (2) conducting coordinated campaigns; and
- (3) improving organizational relationships.

Many of our specific recommendations suggest particular actions that are geared to improving the community's performance in these priority areas. However, it is critical that the ocean conservation community understands the importance of these overarching priorities before implementing the specific remedies we prescribe.

Priority One: Conservation is Politics

If there is a single take-home message from this study, it is that the ocean conservation community needs to participate fully in the political process to be successful. Full participation involves both professional and grassroots lobbying and direct involvement in the electoral process. Lobbying gives an organization's agenda a voice, while electoral involvement makes elected officials willing to listen. The ocean community has participated in personal contact lobbying, but only to a limited extent. Lobbying is about relationships – the type of relationships lacking for the most part with ocean conservationists. The first step in enhancing lobbying is to simply do more of it. The second step is to lobby more effectively. In order to do

this, lobbyists, in particular junior lobbyists, must better understand the rules on Capitol Hill. Simply put, the community needs to do more lobbying and to do it better. Direct electoral involvement will be required because lobbying by itself will not be enough. Electoral politics is a fundamental aspect of our nation's political process and the keystone to policy success. Ocean conservationists have tended to focus on policy and have not gotten involved in electoral politics. As a result, ocean conservation is *not* a factor in the electoral process. The vast majority of U.S. senators and representatives (as well as governors and state legislatures) have not gotten the message that the oceans are in trouble and important reforms are urgently needed. While the oceans have supporters in Congress, there simply are no champions who are willing to fall on their swords for the cause. This is not surprising given that ocean activists have no way to either reward those who fight for ocean conservation or punish those who are opponents. Participating in electoral politics is critically important to cultivating the champions who are necessary for any movement to succeed in advancing its agenda. Doing so will require creating political organizations, like political action committees (PACs), which can solicit and make direct campaign contributions, and so-called 527s, which can conduct voter education, persuasion and turn-out activities.

Priority Two: Coordinated Campaigns Lead to Victory

While strengthening critical strategy areas – communications, grassroots, lobbying, electoral politics – is essential, it is not enough unless they are all used together in a coordinated, strategic way. Successful public policy organizations tend to operate from campaign mode. They establish clearly identified goals as well as the tactics to accomplish the goals, and build in milestones to evaluate progress and make mid-stream adjustments as necessary. This is a proactive process that helps organizations define “victory,” including what is negotiable and how to achieve it. The hallmarks of success (e.g., communications, grassroots support, lobbying, and electoral politics, strategic alliances, etc.) are integrated into the strategy from the beginning. While a campaign can be defensive by design, it is not reactive.

The ocean conservation community is too often reactive. This approach has grown from a culture where organizations or funders identify a problem, have a sincere desire to correct the problem, and forge ahead. While the conservation goals may be readily identifiable, there is often *not* a clear assessment of the likelihood of success, or the impact of success. In addition, the strategy, tactics, and coordination necessary for victory are less clearly defined and

sometimes missing. Finally, the focus and discipline required to achieve victory are easy to lose when not embedded in a tightly constructed plan for action.

The integration of a communications strategy into the overarching strategy is particularly important. Communicating an ocean conservation message to the public, or an identified target audience, is not something the ocean conservation community does well, yet it is fundamental for success. While identifying the message that will resonate has been difficult enough, research by SeaWeb and the Frameworks Institute provides solid advice on how to create more effective messages about ocean conservation. More fundamental, though, is the failure to appreciate the vital importance of communications and to integrate communications professionals and strategies into conservation campaigns from the very beginning. Successful campaigns are built around the right message, not just around the right policy. The ocean conservation community must pay as much attention to communication as it does to policy and begin to integrate communications into all advocacy from the start.

Successful communications is important in building a grassroots base. Successful organizations all have a solid and committed segment of the population that views the organization's success as being concurrent with their own self-interest. Unlike mere supporters, who believe in what the organization advocates but are not necessarily personally affected by its success or failure, an organization's base has a direct and personal stake in the agenda of the organization. A base is not the same thing as a membership. For instance, while the NRA has only about 4 million dues-paying members, its base is made up of the estimated 60-65 million gun owners in this country who have a personal stake in the NRA's agenda of protecting the right to keep and bear arms. An organization's base is a critical component of its political power, because these self-interested individuals are most likely both to contact their elected representatives, and to hold them accountable come election time. To date, the ocean conservation community has put very little effort into identifying and cultivating its base. Until the ocean conservation community develops a reliable base, its ability to produce the "fundamental change in the nation's posture toward its oceans" called for by the Pew Oceans Commission will be limited.

Priority Three: Strong Organizational Relationships Create a Climate for Success

To be successful, ocean conservation organizations will need to improve relationships both within and among groups and cultivate new alliances outside the community. Ocean activists are also not working together effectively to overcome the challenges they face. Competition and distrust are becoming more prevalent. Principles are frequently losing out to personalities, and conserving the oceans sometimes appears to be secondary to protecting turf. Coalitions within the community have struggled to find strength in diversity. Thus, rather than recognizing that having a variety of groups across the ideological spectrum can be a strength, there has been a tendency to attempt to force everyone to adopt similar, often identical, positions. Coalitions have usually been formed from the top down, in response to a particular issue of need rather than allowed to happen “organically” where strategic considerations play a dominant role as to which organizations participate and how.

As a result, much energy has been directed toward securing support for pet projects or infighting, rather than directed toward designing and running effective campaigns. Indeed, one seasoned observer of the community notes that, “[t]ypically, misunderstanding the interest in coordination for a requirement to collaborate in lock step, the relevant regional and national NGOs agree on 95% of a reform agenda, but waste 95% of their time arguing about the 5% details on which they disagree.”

Successful coalitions have many requirements but none greater than the need for all members to compromise. Many organizations have been unwilling to give up some level of control to achieve larger goals. As a result, current partnerships within the community are not highly effective or adequate. In many ways, much of the problem may be an inability to accept differences among organizations and individuals as legitimate, valid points of view, rather than “selling out.” The lack of openness, plus a lack of the habit of resolving conflict amongst allies, of forging compromises and feeling good about having done so, may be at the root of this disharmony.

Successful organizations recognize their weaknesses and are willing to join forces with other organizations that have strengths that compensate for those shortcomings. The ocean conservation community has established alliances (primarily within the community and in rare cases outside) and on occasion these alliances have had success. However, generally these alliances have been too few and too ineffective. Given the small size of the community, and the power of the industrial interests it opposes, forging partnerships and alliances outside the

community is critical to success. Whether it is with environmental groups that have not traditionally worked on ocean issues or with ocean user groups, establishing the right partnerships will bring greater strength to the movement.

Thus, there is a need for organizations to identify and successfully bring like-minded organizations into the fold. This reality will have its costs. First and foremost, it may mean giving up on some issues of importance in order to enlarge the base. No organization or movement can win without a strong base. Right now, the ocean conservation community is lacking a significant base. If conservation is politics and politics is the art of the deal, then the community needs to figure out what deals it can make to enlarge its base.

Specific Recommendations

Once these overarching priorities are recognized and accepted, the hard work of implementing change will begin. To that end, we offer specific recommendations on actions that the ocean conservation community can take to increase its effectiveness. While the majority of our recommendations are directed at individual organizations, it is our strong belief that the charitable foundations and individuals that support ocean conservation have a vital role to play in advancing their implementation. In fact, only with the encouragement and support of their charitable foundation partners and individual donors can organizations navigate the course plotted in this set of recommendations.

These recommendations are generally broken down into the eight hallmark areas – communications, grassroots, lobbying, electoral politics, strategic alliances, research, litigation, and fundraising. We also make recommendations on the overarching area of coordinated campaigning. The full suite of these recommendations and their rationale is laid out in the body of the report. We offer a condensed version of those recommendations here.

Coordinated Campaigns & Strategic Alliances

Successful public policy organizations tend to operate from campaign mode, with clearly established alliances and partners, unwavering focus on their goals and the support of experts and specialists. Such an approach is necessary if the community is to operate as one, if it is to stop operating piecemeal and pool its efforts. We therefore recommend that organizations:

- **Place a greater focus on developing and running strategic campaigns, as discussed above;**

- **Conduct a searching inventory of their internal strengths and weaknesses and become willing to make the necessary adjustments and compromises to form more successful strategic alliances within the community;**
- **Become willing to form more successful strategic alliances with new partners *outside* the community;**
- **Redouble efforts to spend limited resources efficiently by working to accomplish fundamental reform that will lead to real and lasting protection for the oceans and their wildlife;**
- **Recruit the appropriate specialists, in particular, the underutilized communications, grassroots, and political professionals.**

Message, Message, and More Message

Successful public policy organizations understand their mission and audience and communicate with skill and efficiency, working closely with specialists from the beginning. Thus, ocean conservation organizations should:

- **Include communications experts in any and all campaign strategy discussions from the beginning;**
- **Hire more seasoned communications professionals to complement the current talent pool;**
- **Develop a positive vision that can be communicated to the public and decision-makers;**
- **Craft more compelling messages about ocean conservation using the research by SeaWeb and the Frameworks Institutes;**
- **Increase significantly the quantity and depth of public opinion research to inform communications and outreach.**

Time to Build a Constituency for the Oceans

Successful public policy organizations build large bases of support and know how to activate them through proven and innovative channels to achieve their goals. We therefore recommend that organizations:

- **Continue ongoing efforts and enhance the level of sophistication in future efforts to build a base;**

- **Cultivate a base by identifying individuals with a direct connection to the ocean, in addition to those who are merely “supporters” of conservation;**
- **Develop the list enhancement tool, which compares voting records with conservation group membership lists to determine the most likely activists;**
- **Continue to explore the role of the Internet as part of a plan for establishing and building a relationship with a base.**

Enhancing Effectiveness of Lobbying

Successful public policy organizations build relationships with their elected officials and work with professionals and insiders to achieve success from within the system. Thus, organizations should:

- **Increase as quickly as feasible the quantity of personal contact lobbying;**
- **Place greater emphasis on understanding the behavior required for effective lobbying;**

Consider hiring Washington insider lobbyists on specific issues such as working the Appropriations Committees;

- **Spend more energy on finding real constituents, especially those that may have a personal connection, to lobby their senators and representatives;**
- **Explore options for creating a congressional fellowship program that would place interns in congressional offices;**
- **Evaluate the feasibility of an ocean issues think tank, which could articulate a long-term vision for ocean conservation, produce strategic publications and writings to advance this agenda, and provide quick-response expertise to the U.S. Congress.**

Electoral Politics is the Keystone

Successful public policy organizations cultivate congressional champions for their cause and hold them accountable. We therefore recommend that the ocean conservation community:

- **Create independent political committees – both a Political Action Committee, which can endorse and oppose candidates, as well as a 527**

organization, which can participate in issue advocacy and get-out-the-vote activities – that will focus solely on ocean conservation.

Scientific Information is Important, But it is Not Enough

While science is important to any conservation effort, it rarely carries the day in any public policy debate, since all such disputes are essentially political in nature. Nevertheless, it may be necessary to increase scientific capacity. In this regard, we recommend that organizations:

- **Increase scientific capacity, but as a secondary priority to implementing the recommended communication, grassroots, lobbying, and political changes;**
- **Create formal and informal science and conservation partnerships to tackle overarching issues such as the desire to separate fish science/conservation decisions from allocation decisions in the management process, as well as species or location specific issues (i.e., assessments, location of marine reserve);**
- **Evaluate enhancing existing scientific capacity through the creation of a scientific “SWAT team” that can provide quick scientific assistance on important questions.**

Litigation Must Be Strategic

Successful public policy organizations use litigation only as one part of a larger, strategic campaign. Thus, we recommend that organizations:

- **Approach litigation with a great deal more political savvy.**

Funding and Fundraising Must Evolve

Successful public policy organizations have financial stability with multiple sources of income, but fundraising should not consume an inordinate amount of an organization’s time and energy. Therefore, we recommend that:

- **Charitable foundations consider changing their grant-making cycles, by moving to long-term general support grants with heavy planning up front, but limited reporting before the end of the grant term;**
- **Organizations continue to identify and cultivate additional foundations and individuals that will support ocean conservation;**

- **Charitable foundations and individual donors ensure that ocean conservation organizations implement the recommendations contained in this report.**

A New Challenge

The challenges and opportunities facing the ocean conservation community have never been greater. More than one author has referred to this as “the Decade of the Ocean.” This may be the case, but in what sense? Is this the decade when the collective efforts of conservationists, scientists, concerned ocean users, and policy-makers use the growing recognition and understanding to reverse the decades of neglect to ensure healthy, thriving oceans? Or is it the decade when good intentions rather than effective advocacy stranded the ocean conservation community?

Relative to other environmental issues, ocean conservation is a young movement. All movements on the rise experience growing pains, and the ocean conservation community is no exception. How this period of transition is handled will be critical to future success. Thus, while change is necessary, we recognize the huge potential of the ocean conservation community and equally daunting challenges that lay ahead. Now is the time to repair and reinvigorate this vital effort.

Leaders of the major ocean conservation organizations and programs around the country must acknowledge that meeting these challenges and seizing these opportunities will be exceedingly difficult without significant changes in the current political, public opinion, and organizational climates. If the status quo continues, ocean advocates may win a battle or two, but ultimately lose the war.

We offer these recommendations with a sense of optimism. We believe they can help the ocean conservation community chart a new course in ocean advocacy – a course steeped in the ocean community’s collective dedication, hard work, and victories.

In summary, we are convinced the tide can be turned and that the ocean conservation community will rise to this new challenge. But just as the community is telling policy-makers that bold, new initiatives are needed, the advocacy community also needs to embrace bold changes to move forward. Once embraced, the changes we suggest will help ocean conservationists lead the nation to thriving oceans and ocean-dependent communities.

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