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Legal Bedrock for Rebuilding America's Ocean Ecosystems

Mary Turnipseed,^{1*} Larry B. Crowder,² Raphael Sagarin,³ and Stephen E. Roady⁴

Recent discussions about ocean policy reform have focused on ecosystem-based management, which fully incorporates humans and considers the cumulative impacts of their activities on ecosystems and the services they provide (1). This approach is logical given the highly interconnected social-ecological systems of the ocean (2) and may be best realized through comprehensive marine spatial planning and ocean zoning (3). But U.S. ocean governance as currently configured cannot easily accommodate ecosystem-based management (4).

Federal waters, which include the territorial sea and the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), reach from the 3 or 9-nm borders of state waters out to the 200-nm outer boundary of the EEZ, an ocean area in which the United States has rights to exploring, exploiting, and managing living and nonliving resources (5-7). Because of the United States' extensive coastlines and territorial holdings, the U.S. EEZ covers 3.6 million nautical square miles and is larger than the combined land area of the fifty states. Over 20 federal agencies operating under dozens of laws regulate activities in the EEZ, support ocean-based commerce, and protect marine species and habitats (8). These agencies separately manage parts of marine ecosystems, without any systematic effort to coordinate their actions for the public good (9).

With new leadership in place in Washington, U.S. ocean policy is poised for a long-overdue transformation. Since two national

ocean commissions highlighted the need for dramatic reform 5 years ago (8, 10), progress has been made towards understanding how to rebuild ocean ecosystems (e.g., 11, 12). But implementing a new, ecosystem-based policy regime for federal ocean waters will require a solid legal foundation that provides the authority for, and imposes responsibility upon, disparate federal agencies to collaborate in their management of ocean resources.

The Public Trust Doctrine would provide this critical foundation. The Doctrine is a simple but powerful legal concept that obliges state governments to manage certain natural resources in the best interest of their citizens (13). More generally, a "trust" is a legal relationship in which a person or entity (the "trustee") manages a property or resource for the benefit of another person or group. The trustee is legally bound to preserve the assets of the trust, allowing only judicious use of the assets and repairing the trust should it be harmed. The trustee must also manage the trust in the exclusive interest of the beneficiaries (14). The beneficiaries of states' public trusts include living and future citizens (14). Thus, inherent to the Doctrine is the idea of intergenerational equity; trustees must manage trust assets so that needs of current beneficiaries are met without sacrificing needs of future beneficiaries. A federal Public Trust Doctrine, if formally extended from state waters to the edges of the EEZ, would identify federal agencies as having responsibility for marine resources as trustees of the U.S. ocean public trust and U.S. citizens as the sole beneficiaries.

Many analysts, including the presidentially appointed U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, have assumed that the Doctrine already extends to the vast space of the territorial sea and EEZ (8, *supporting online text*). But our recent review (15) reveals that the legal authority and responsibility of the federal government to manage marine resources in the best interest of U.S. citizens have not been formally articulated by the courts or es-

tablished in federal law. Instead, the Doctrine is well established in the U.S. only at the state level (16), where courts have consistently held that the Public Trust Doctrine requires state agencies and attorneys general to seek legal action against private parties infringing on the public trust. Also, a widely upheld tenet of the Doctrine is that state trustees cannot abdicate their responsibility to manage the trust; if they do, the Doctrine enables citizens to seek judicial review of their actions (or inaction; *supporting online text*). In some states, courts have used the Public Trust Doctrine to protect coastal ecosystem services (17, 18), and Massachusetts recently passed the first state law mandating a comprehensive ocean management plan "to ensure its effective stewardship of the ocean waters held in trust for the benefit of the public" (19). Though states do work cooperatively with federal agencies on issues such as coastal zone and fisheries management, they alone cannot protect U.S. ocean resources and the services they provide: ocean ecosystems are interconnected across state and federal political lines, and states have limited authority in federal waters (*supporting online text*).

In addition to providing a consistent framework for federal ocean agencies implementing ecosystem-based management, a Public Trust Doctrine for U.S. federal waters would be a policy backstop for these agencies to enforce the public trust against infringing parties. Importantly, the Doctrine would also extend greater standing to U.S. citizens to protect their interest in the management of ocean trust resources in the instance of abuse or neglect of the trust (*supporting online text*). And, with the current scientific understanding of the necessity of coordinated, comprehensive action to stem the widespread declines of U.S. marine ecosystems (9), it would be difficult for a federal agency operating under a public trust mandate to avoid working cooperatively with agencies that manage other components of

¹Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA.

²Center for Marine Conservation, Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, Beaufort, NC 28516, USA.

³Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA.

⁴Duke University Law School and Nicholas School of the Environment, Duke University, Durham, NC 27708, USA, and Earthjustice, Washington, DC 20036, USA.

*Correspondence to: mary.turnipseed@duke.edu

the ocean ecosystem. Therefore, explicitly mandating the common responsibility of these agencies to protect the ocean public trust could catalyze cross-sectoral ecosystem-based management in U.S. oceans.

A federal Public Trust Doctrine for U.S. ocean waters could be established in a number of ways:

Executive Order: The President could make expanding the Doctrine a signature of his administration through an Executive Order that directs all federal ocean agencies to apply their resources towards cooperatively and sustainably managing the ocean public trust (*supporting online text*).

Judicial Interpretation: Federal judges could extend the Doctrine into the territorial sea and EEZ by invoking the same instruments relied upon by state courts to enlarge the reach of the Doctrine – judicial precedents, language in existing statutes, and the common law (*supporting online text*).

Congressional Mandate: The Congress could unambiguously write the Doctrine into federal oceans law. As one example, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) could be given the following directive: “NOAA’s mission is to manage and protect public trust resources within the waters and atmosphere of the U.S. with the cooperation of other federal and state agencies.” Once mandated, the Doctrine could be put into practice via agency memoranda – a top-down approach to implementing broad changes in agency practice for which there is ample precedent (*e.g.*, 20) – directing all workers to carry out the legislated work of their agencies under their newly articulated duties as trustees of the ocean public trust.

Just as assets in our economy are inextricably linked, assets in our ocean trust portfolio are linked with one another. To move past the failing status quo in U.S. ocean management and build a vigorous mandate that provides both the authority and the responsibility for federal agencies to jointly work to manage U.S. oceans as whole ecosystems will require that we answer, as soon as possible, two critical questions: for whom should our country’s oceans be managed, and for what purpose? The Public Trust Doctrine answers both of these questions. By insisting that federal agencies manage the U.S. ocean public trust for the long-term benefit of all American citizens, citizens and the governments they elect can begin to harmonize the concepts of representative democracy and sustainable resource use and stewardship.

References and Notes

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