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## Marketing MPA's

*Enviros alienate anglers over Marine Protected Areas.*

**By Ted Williams**

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**Marine Protected Areas (MPAs)**, traditional tools for conserving ocean resources, include national parks, national marine sanctuaries, national estuarine research reserves, national wildlife refuges and sundry fish-management designations. In the North Atlantic, for example, Buzzard's Bay and Stellwagen Bank are MPAs because mobile-gear net fishing is banned in the former and oil drilling and mineral mining are banned in the latter. In the South Atlantic the MPA known as the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary has made it possible to zone Jet Skis out of bonefish flats and prohibit the destruction of coral reefs and their fauna by commercial collectors.

Flats guide and FR&R saltwater editor, Jeffrey Cardenas, gets no argument from me when he calls for more instead of fewer restrictions in the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary. "I think the beautiful Marquesas atoll needs to have at least an idle-speed only regulation," he remarks. "And I'd like to see a [no-kill] zone, too." You could fish, but you'd have to release everything—not a problem for Florida fly rodders because they release everything anyway.

America has about 300 MPAs, and we're desperately in need of more, especially in light of the gross failure of fish managers to protect many of the stocks they've been entrusted with. That is why it grieves me to see MPAs given a bad name by certain environmental outfits who don't know fish or fishers but who claim to know what's best for both. For two years a nasty, absurd tiff between enviros and sportsmen has diverted both parties from real enemies they should be confronting together. It's as if Patton and Montgomery had called off the Italian campaign to engage each other in a duel with wet towels.

The trouble started on May 26, 2000 when President Clinton signed Executive Order 13158, thereby issuing a rallying cry for a coordinated, science-based network of MPAs, calling for public participation in MPA consideration and setting up a citizens' committee to advise the secretaries of Commerce and Interior on designations. The order came with no money and no new authorities. It was prudent, timely, precisely what marine fish needed. But environmental groups such as the Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense, the Natural Resources Defense Council (NRDC) and the Sierra Club took it as a call to arms. That might not have been such a bad thing had they proceeded intelligently, reaching out to sportsmen for advice and support. But they didn't.

"Marine protected areas, which restrict or prohibit fishing, offer one of the best tools for restoring depleted fishing stocks and damaged ocean ecosystems," proclaims NRDC. "Yet despite strong support from scientists and the general public, one group--sportfishermen--continues to try to block the creation of marine reserves. . . . Ironically, this group--sportfishermen--stands to benefit from this innovative tool." But MPAs don't necessarily, or even usually, "restrict or prohibit fishing." The rule establishing Stellwagen Bank National Marine Sanctuary even contains language prohibiting sportfishing restrictions. When sportfishermen read this baloney they often believe it. No wonder they hate MPAs.

In late September 2000 NRDC invited 15 marine scientists to its New York City headquarters to kibitz for a day and a half about MPAs. A day and a half isn't much time to start thinking about MPAs and then decide where they need to go, especially MPAs as defined by NRDC which "restrict or prohibit fishing." After each scientist had scrawled out his wish list, NRDC used software to project the "polygons," as it called the hoped-for no-fishing zones, onto a map. As NRDC itself reports: "Overlaying the polygons revealed multiple nominations for five ocean areas comprising some 19.4 percent of the study area: the nine submarine canyons; the offshore waters near Cape Hatteras, North Carolina; tilefish habitat between Cape May, New Jersey, and Cape Cod, Massachusetts; a 35-kilometer (18.9-nautical mile) corridor of nearshore waters extending along the study area; and a band along the continental shelf break encompassing the upper slope."

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Basically, it consisted of everyone's favorite fishing holes. With that, NRDC began distributing the maps to the public with no explanation that the polygons were just starting points for discussion. Anglers were aghast. "If NRDC wanted to create opposition, they could hardly have done it any more effectively," says Dr. Carl Safina, head of the National Audubon Society's Living Oceans Campaign and one of the most well-spoken and outspoken advocates for MPAs. "It has been a public-relations blunder that is completely unmatched in the environmental community."

"The first instinct is let's get some proposals together, put them on the table and talk," comments Dr. Cheri Recchia, director of marine protected areas for the Ocean Conservancy (formerly Center for Marine Conservation). "But often it's not a good approach because people misunderstand. That can really antagonize." Recchia impresses with her directness and obvious commitment to ocean resources. When I asked her how sportsmen and enviros got into this spat she said: "The environmental community doesn't always do a good job of explaining. . . . Sometimes there is a confusion about terminology, and that's been very damaging. When some of us use the term MPAs we mean closed to fishing; others mean something closer to the international usage which is a whole spectrum of areas including some closed to fishing." It was a perceptive and honest statement, especially given the fact that no group is more guilty of confusing terminology than her own.

Consider the Conservancy's Ocean Wilderness Challenge launched in June 2001 "to promote a new ocean ethic and achieve wilderness protection for special sites in US waters and in the Caribbean." The stated goal is to protect "at least five percent of US waters as wilderness." That doesn't sound like very much until you reflect that anglers fish in about one percent, and no one's going to prohibit fishing where there aren't any fish.

But wilderness is a good thing, right? It has never limited fishing or hunting; in fact it has preserved and enhanced both by banning such habitat-wrecking activities as logging, roading, oil and gas exploration, mining and tooling around in motorized off-road vehicles. For 38 years conservation writers have preached to sportsmen that wilderness isn't a plot by the antis to "lock up" federal land, that hunters and anglers conceived the idea of wilderness, started the Wilderness Society, shepherded through the Wilderness Act. Some sportsmen are beginning to get the message. But motorheads and extractive industries fronting as wise-use groups keep hissing in their ears about "access" as if feet didn't work anymore. It's hard to educate people in a miasma of white noise. And now comes the Ocean Conservancy.

"Ocean wilderness will allow fishing, won't it?" I asked the Conservancy's Greg Helms, who is heading an initiative to convert almost 25 percent of the Channel Islands National Marine Sanctuary off Los Angeles to ocean wilderness.

"Oh no," he said. "You won't be able to fish." I inquired about no-kill fishing for pelagics that don't stay in MPAs anyway. "Not that either," he said. "You can dive it; you can surf it; but there's no catch-and-release fishing. You can't do that with native fish in national parks or wilderness areas." "You can't?" I intoned, scarcely believing my ears.

"No," he said. "Generally speaking, you can fish for fish that are placed there using user fees for the specific purpose of fishing them. But you can't harm an indigenous natural resource." That, of course, is incorrect. Non-indigenous fish are not stocked in national parks or wilderness areas, and catch-and-release fishing as well as catch-and-kill fishing is legal in both.

**The Ocean Conservancy** (by redefining wilderness) and NRDC (by redefining MPAs) have undone a generation of conservation education and propped up wobbling wise-use lies. Sportsmen, a naive and paranoid lot even under the best of circumstances, freak out when they encounter real or imagined threats to access. They have not reacted well to the MPA initiative, but they have acted predictably. If the enviros had bothered to communicate with sportsmen, they could have avoided a war, gained allies and learned what kinds of MPAs are genuinely beneficial to fish.

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Anyone whose head wasn't in the sand or clouds could see the conflict coming. Mike Nussman, president of the American Sportfishing Association, told me this: "I went around for two years saying, 'Guys we're going to have a hell of a fight about this because there's nothing we value more than the public's ability to get on the water. And you're going to tell us we can't fish. Unless that's the only way to solve a fishery problem most anglers aren't going to be terribly receptive.' I preached and preached that, and basically everyone blew me off."

Nussman and his predecessor, Mike Hayden, have managed to convince the tackle industry that the best way to improve sales is to preserve and restore fish stocks; it was an idea that hadn't previously occurred to it. ASA is better and smarter than other trade associations, so I hate to see it coming out with press releases that have titles like: "Extreme Environmentalists Offer Misleading Statements on MPAs." "Extreme environmentalists" is the euphemism polluters and habitat-destroyers use for people who successfully disrupt their exploitation. The Earth Liberation Front is "extreme." The Ocean Conservancy and NRDC are just stupid.

Mostly, though, the ASA has maintained its cool. Not so the otherwise savvy, effective CCA (Coastal Conservation Association). For example, my fellow members and I received the following communication from President David Cummins: "Recreational fishing is under attack as never before . . . attack by the feds and the radical environmentalists. . . . Environmental extremists are conspiring with federal bureaucrats to take away our freedom to fish. . . . These No Fishing Zones are a power grab; they're all about control of the citizens, not protection of anything. . . . Now picture this: the fish-no-more map proposed by these well-funded environmentalists. I've seen it and I can tell you what it looks like. You'll be stunned. All along the Atlantic, from Maine on south, wherever there are aggregations of fish, they're proposing to ban fishing. . . . If you ever dreamed of fishing in the blue waters surrounding our fiftieth state, take your swimming gear but leave your fishing tackle home." With that Cummins launched into a come-on for the CCA Legal Defense Fund: "Will you help? Unless we are financially ready to defend against this insidious attack, we are not ready at all. P.S. These proposed No Fishing Zones are the most serious threat to sport fishing in my lifetime. The CCA Legal Defense Fund exists to beat back just these kinds of challenges."

CCA's reaction to the MPA initiative hurt it more than the MPAs would have. For example, Cummins' letter alienated the Norcross Wildlife Foundation, which disburses major grants to groups working on behalf of fish and wildlife and on which I serve as a board member. Our president, Richard Reagan, responded as follows: "Dear Mr. Cummins: On reading your letter I find that Norcross apparently falls into the odious classification of being 'radical environmentalists' and 'environmental extremists,' simply because we support conservation of marine fisheries and fish habitat. . . . Your letter is a poor imitation of the type of hysterical screed broadcast by the NRA and its president, Charlton Heston. In it, you have insulted the work of yeomen in fisheries conservation who focus on the environmental long view. . . . For the foreseeable this suspends Norcross's support of CCA and its state and local chapters."

More unfortunate fallout of the ill-conceived, ill-executed MPA initiative comes in the form of the Freedom to Fish Act, written by ASA and now before the US Senate. (Note: I used the word "unfortunate," not "unnecessary.") Basically, the bill would amend the Magnuson Act so that if a site is closed to recreational fishing, the managing agency would have to produce science showing that recreational fishing contributed to the problem. Once fish populations are restored the area would have to be reopened to recreational fishing. All that's fine, and ASA deserves credit for hatching the bill, if only to get the attention of the environmental community and force some kind of compromise.

But the danger of this kind of legislation is that it attracts the ugliest opportunists from the wise-use camp such as Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson (R-TX), one of the bill's two major sponsors and among the most vicious enemies of fish and wildlife in the Senate. Sportsmen prop up legislators like Hutchinson at their extreme peril. During the Clinton administration she pushed through a lengthy suspension of new listings under the Endangered Species Act. The voting criteria established by the non-partisan League of Conservation Voters shows her voting for the interests of fish and wildlife zero percent of the time for each of the last five years.

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**Environmentalists alienate sportsmen** not just because they don't take the time to get to know them but because they don't take the time to get to know fish and fishing. Nowhere is an MPA more desperately needed than in the Channel Islands off Los Angeles. This is because the indigenous and mostly sedentary groundfish live long and therefore reproduce slowly. A cowcod, for instance, can make it to 100 years. The dark-blotched rockfish probably lives for 150 years. The groundfish resource around the islands has been essentially destroyed. Fishing should be banned for these species, and in a lot more than 25 percent of the sanctuary. Catch-and-release is not an option because when you haul up these fish their air bladders pop out of their mouths. Mortality is 100 percent.

But 200 feet above the groundfish there are thriving populations of highly migratory pelagics such as yellowtail, tunas and wahoo. They're in the MPA one minute, out the next. Why ban fishing for them? Or why not at least allow no-kill? Well, basically, it's "easier" to ban everything, say the enviros. But it isn't. Their refusal to bend on this issue is likely to derail not just the Channel Islands MPA but the entire network of MPAs proposed for the California coast.

In the needless alienation of anglers fish managers frequently pick up where enviros leave off. Three years ago the Gulf of Mexico Fishery Management Council moved to set up a no-fishing MPA where reef fish such as groupers, snappers and amberjacks gathered to spawn. Such spawning aggregations are highly vulnerable to commercial and sport fishing, and that's why reef fish keep crashing. A no-fishing MPA for the reef-fish complex made lots of sense, and CCA, especially Florida CCA, endorsed it because the council promised to allow surface fishing for highly migratory pelagics. But at its last meeting, after all the public testimony had been heard, the council decided the enforcers' lives would be easier if it just prohibited all fishing. "We felt that they almost defrauded the public," says Florida CCA's director, Ted Forsgren. So CCA sued, eventually winning a settlement in which surface fishing for pelagics was reinstated, but not before lots of hard feelings and bad publicity for MPAs.

MPAs are valuable when they are used correctly, worthless or hurtful when they are not. One of the incorrect uses, standard with the MPAs now being pushed by the environmental community, is promulgating them independently of fisheries management plans. It does no good to save all the fish in part of the ocean if we overharvest them in the rest of it.

"Fisheries are managed as a function of yield stream—based on adjusting some level of output from the stock, quotas, limits, etc.," comments Louisiana State University's Dr. James Cowan, chairman of the Reef Fish Stock Assessment Panel for the Gulf Council. "But fishes within no-fishing reserves are no longer part of the yield stream. If you set aside 20 percent of the harvest potential, now 100 percent of the yield is going to come from that 80 percent. That's one of the tradeoffs, and we don't know enough about these tradeoffs to make informed decisions right now. When [no-fishing] MPAs are established you tend to see a relatively quick recovery of small fishes in the protected area. The forage base recovers, but a lot of the large fishes for which the reserve was set aside are relatively mobile, and if the fishing pressure isn't changed outside the boundaries, they don't recover."

Cowan believes that the enviros are being driven by the "crappy record" of fish managers, a record he claims is fast improving under the new language of the Sustainable Fisheries Management Act, which mandates sustainability. At any rate, there is nothing mystic or unattainable about good fisheries management. It is entirely possible, as Florida and Texas have demonstrated with their spectacular successes with redfish. Although many managers have yet to try good fisheries management (thanks to the fact that the public, including enviros and sportsmen, have tolerated their dereliction), this doesn't mean we need to rush around decorating the ocean with no-fishing signs.

The sad thing is that enviros really could bring back fish stocks if they'd bother to learn what the limiting factors are. In the Northeast, for example, MPAs won't help as long as otter trawls are legal. Otter trawls remove fish stocks while simultaneously destroying their habitat. They "clearcut" the bottom, razing sea fans, coral and all structure that sustains juvenile fish and forage of adults.