Our Ocean Backyard

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Ocean Good News

These days the news coming from the ocean is usually anything but positive or encouraging, whether ocean acidification, harmful algal blooms and closed fishing seasons, ocean warming and coral reef bleaching, water quality decline, overfishing, loss of habitat, sea-level rise and shoreline erosion, there are a mind-numbing list of problems out there to be concerned about. These issues encouraged me a few years ago to look into the problems along our coastlines, which culminated in a book and also a class I teach, Coasts in Crisis - A Global Challenge.

But for me personally, being a teacher, writer, father and grandfather, I need to have hope, and I think of this as sober optimism. I don’t want to minimize or sugarcoat these concerns, but also believe that it’s important to recognize and take some comfort in success stories where we can find them, rather than being totally paralyzed with the bad news. There are countless dedicated individuals and many conservation organizations and groups working to improve the situation we find ourselves in today. This column is focused on some positive stories and good news.

The recovery of whale populations is one major success story, due in large part to a 1980s global moratorium on whale hunting. It may be difficult to believe, but right up to the time that the Marine Mammal Protection Act was passed in the USA in 1972, there was still an active whaling station operating on the east side of San Francisco Bay at Richmond. In fact, some of those who were employed at the station are still around.

Although the North Atlantic right whale is critically endangered, most other species are slowly rebounding. The number of South Atlantic humpback whales was about 450 in the 1950s and the global estimates today are about 35,000 to 40,000. For large animals that produce only a single calf every two or more years after a 12-month pregnancy, this is a remarkable recovery. The numbers of blue, fin and sei whales are also growing globally.

Another success story has emerged with sea turtles, although protection is still important. The number of Kemp’s Ridley turtle nests in Texas rose from just a single nest in 1979 to over 350 in 2015. In Florida, green turtle nests grew from 62 to over 37,000 during this same 36-year period. Both good news for these two populations.

Two bluefin tuna species, a yellowfin, and an albacore are no longer critically endangered or have moved off the leading international list of endangered species entirely. Their rapid migration from the edge of extinction demonstrates that tuna conservation is working.

Although there have been challenges in California and elsewhere in establishing marine protected areas (MPAs), progress continues to be made in setting aside particularly important ecosystems globally. Presently nearly eight percent of the oceans has been at least established as MPAs, but less than half of that is completely protected from fishing or other resource losses.

Oil tanker spills have also declined significantly in recent years, in large part due to the steady improvement in regulations and the efforts of the International Maritime Organization’s International Convention for the Prevention of Pollution from ships.

While the issue of plastic and microplastic in the ocean is one we have become increasingly aware of, we still have a long ways to go. While the total amount of plastic entering the oceans yearly is estimated at about 9 million tons, this is a difficult number to determine accurately. We do know that the great bulk of that plastic is coming from Asian countries. Globally, only about 10 percent of plastic is recycled. While there have been several proposals on how to clean up the plastic in the ocean, this is simply not a viable option due to the size of the oceans and because much of the plastic is in very small pieces and it isn’t all concentrated at the surface. The only solution that is feasible or practical is to cut the plastic off at the source, which is at the shoreline, including rivers and streams.

While fossil fuels still provide about 80% of all U.S. and global energy, capturing wind energy from offshore is now increasingly competitive, sustainable and clean. Europe already has 3,250 offshore wind turbines with more planned or under construction. Offshore power production from wind more than doubled between 2006 and 2009 and then quadrupled between 2009 and 2014.

Rhode Island installed the USA’s first offshore wind farm in 2016 with five turbines. Under the present administration the Bureau of Offshore Energy Management (BOEM) has been pushed to expand offshore wind production and leases have now been offered in federal waters off of a number of east coast states. California has been working with BOEM through a stakeholder engagement process to identify potential areas for offshore wind turbines including floating wind farms further offshore to minimize visual impacts. The two areas now moving forward include offshore Morro Bay and Humboldt Bay in northern California. In addition to clean and renewable electricity, these wind farms will provide well-paying jobs and benefit local economies. Twenty billion dollars were invested in offshore wind globally in 2020 alone, with a projection of $56 billion in 2021.

While there are local impacts of these turbines, leading environmental groups see those risks as quite acceptable with appropriate planning, design and operation. In March 2021, the Sierra Club stated that “It’s past time to push for more offshore wind.”