



Tidepool Originals: VOICES

Film Seeks Common Ground on Marine Reserves

A new movie shows the beautiful deeps of the Oregon Coast as it explores the tricky issue of marine reserves

by [JOEL GALLOB](#) | posted 01.25.05

When you see the scallop almost magically bouncing across the screen, not along the seafloor but in the middle of the water, in the new movie "Oregon Ocean: Common Ground," you realize that the film, like that scallop, is doing a tightrope act with no tightrope.

The movie is intended to support the creation of marine reserves in Oregon waters. And it makes the case quite well. But it also urges the inclusion of fishermen and fishing communities in the process by which Oregon may create such reserves, even if doing so requires the tricky, difficult business of building consensus and accepting that politics is the art of the possible, not the perfect.

The film, which premiered January 18th in Newport, and played in Portland the next day, will, says filmmaker Karen Meyer, be shown at other locales around Oregon. It is, as everyone who saw it in Newport agreed, a strikingly beautiful film. Although only a half-hour long, it's National Geographic-like gorgeousness makes much of that half-hour seem like underwater heaven.

But the film is more than a travelogue, or even an advocacy film. It is -- or in any event may prove to be -- part of the process by which Oregon may yet create a string of marine reserves within its three-mile territorial sea.

The issue is one of the most controversial in the Northwest yet, unlike the region's timber wars, it is not a monstrously polarized one. There are people who support the concept of these "underwater wilderness areas," and there are people who do not. But there are also many somewhere in between, and the fishing community itself shows a full range of opinions about the idea. That is healthy, and it enables filmmaker Meyer to interview some of Oregon's leading coastal fishermen, as well as scientists and environmentalists, who support such reserves.

The movie divides its time between visits to marine reserves in other places, where, it reports, they have been successful and popular, and the Oregon coast, where the concept, Meyer says, "is actually pretty widely accepted." Along the way, Meyer (and the audience) get to see some of the world's most beautiful places, including sites of the Oregon coast that only a handful of scientists have seen: rocky reefs and finger-like pinnacles, swirling kelp forests and the fish-rich shallows of the Oregon continental shelf.

"There's a quote from Dr. Jane Lubchenco in the movie," Meyer says, "that if we want to have healthy fisheries and healthy fishing communities, we need to have healthy marine ecosystems. Around the world we've seen fisheries crash, and for the same reasons we see here."

Yet she is not quick to blame the fishermen. "I've listened to a lot of fishermen," she said. "I've gone out on a lot of boats, and seen the work they do. They're amazing -- smart and tough and independent. They have to know so much, and the rules they live with are complex and always changing."

And, perhaps surprisingly, Meyer did not find what some environmentalists have argued exists -- a huge terrain of underwater ecosystems devastated by the bottom trawlers.

"It's not clear how bad the effects have been," she said, "there isn't enough assessment yet." Some bottom areas have certainly been hurt, she says, but some key habitats -- the rocky reefs and pinnacles -- are places that chew up fishing nets yet house diverse, rich communities.

But the need for such marine reserves is clear anyway, the film argues. We have seen fish population crashes off New England and more recently, the closure of some 10,000 square miles of groundfish habitat off the West Coast. Not all the rock- and other groundfish species are in serious trouble, but several are. And it stands to reason that one way to help rebuild depleted species is to identify their critical habitat, get man and his machines out of those areas, and leave the fish and their home the heck alone.

"It's really a no brainer," says Paul Engelmeyer, a policy analyst with Environmental Defense.

Across the globe, the film reports, marine reserves are working. Meyer interviewed fishermen off the Georges Bank, on St. Lucia in the Caribbean, and in the Florida Keys, and in all those sites, she found that that fishermen who had vigorously opposed creation of local reserves are now their strongest supporters.

The reason is what some biologists call the "fringe effect." If a region of essential habitat is properly identified, set aside, and protected, it creates an area where weakened fish species can grow and thrive -- and as the fish grow in numbers, many leave the reserve. In time, that makes the area around the reserve especially rich fishing grounds. With the protection of critical habitat -- rearing areas for young, and foraging areas for the fat old females who are the most reproductively prolific -- the reserves become staging areas for the invasion of depleted waters by recovering species. Inside the reserves, they continue to grow and reproduce; outside, they become fair game for the fishers.

This has happened, Meyer says, in numerous warm water reserves. But she warns that marine reserves off Oregon would not produce such dramatic results so quickly. Temperate water rockfish grow slower, reach sexual maturity later, and achieve peak fertility later than fish in the warm Caribbean.

But the rockfish have a secret weapon on their side. That, says Oregon State University marine biologist Mark Hixon, is "Big Old Fat Fertile Females, BOFF." Females of many rockfish species become geometrically more productive as they age. Add a year, and a large mature female

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may produce ten times as many eggs, and young, as she did the year before. Add another year, and she will produce perhaps yet ten times again more offspring.

The flip-side to identifying the habitat of the BOFF rockfish is identifying the dispersal areas for their larvae, Hixon said. If key habitat for the big mamas and key dispersal areas for their plentiful children can be identified, we may craft reserves that are nowhere near as large as the current trawl closure area on the West Coast, and yet are equally or more effective, over the long haul, than that kind of large-scale exclusion.

Oregon has followed a go-slow procedure in looking at marine reserves. The Ocean Policy Advisory Committee (OPAC), which now reports to Gov. Ted Kulongoski, was asked a few years ago to look into reserves by former Gov. John Kitzhaber. OPAC members spent hundreds of hours researching reserves, and dozens more interviewing biologists, fish regulators, conservationists and fishermen before endorsing creation of small reserves as an experiment. The goal was not to use the reserves as a fisheries recovery tool, but to begin the process and to use them as, in effect, insurance against future troubles, and to set a baseline for scientific research.

So far, that process has not led to any reserves in Oregon's ocean, even though there already are reserves in Washington and California state waters. On the other hand, when the California legislature tried to create a string of large new reserves, and impose them top down, the effort collapsed in political battle, lawsuits and recriminations.

The Oregon approach, says Meyer, is better, and many in Oregon, including Gail Achterman, advisor to governors and director of the Natural Resources Institute, and Onno Husing, director of the Oregon Coastal Zone Management Association, agree -- even if Husing is more worried about their impact on coastal economies than perhaps Meyer is.

But virtually all who have been involved in it agree that the Oregon process, though slow, is the right way to go. Oregon has sought to be maximally inclusive -- bringing all stakeholders (fishers, coastal communities, conservationists, scientists and the public) into its process, and making it bottom-up. While that may take longer to get there, says Meyer, it may produce better reserves, since it will add fishermen's experience to scientists' data. And it may create viable, politically sustainable reserves, and the political will to enforce and monitor them.

In the film *Scott Boley*, a south Oregon coast fisherman and fishing leader says, "Marine reserves is not a panacea. It is another tool we can use in fisheries management. But we need to do the research, the enforcement, and the work with impacted communities to make it happen, and have the funding to do that."

Boley has said, elsewhere, that he hopes reserves will be an alternative to, not in addition to, some existing regulatory mechanisms. Meyers' view is a bit different.

"They're a tool, a part of the answer," Meyers says. "But with them, we may have a mechanism to get us out of crisis-to-crisis management." They are not, she says, an alternative to catch limits and gear restrictions. But they could be an alternative to huge emergency closures of the sort used by regulators, first in commercial rockfish trawling, and then, more briefly this fall, for sport and charter rockfish fishing.

The goal is sustainable fish species, sustainable ecosystems, sustainable fishing communities and sustainable coastal economies, she says. "Oregon Ocean: Common Ground," by giving voice to different views, not just one or two, just may help make that happen.

Joel Gallob is a political and environmental reporter with the Newport News-Times living on the Oregon Coast.



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