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'Common Ground' promotes reserves issue too

By Susan Chambers, Staff Writer

CHARLESTON - Local residents packed the dining room to overflowing at the Oregon Institute of Marine Biology on Thursday evening for a screening of "Common Ground" - a documentary film promoting the establishment of marine reserves in Oregon state waters and a lively discussion afterward.

Karen Meyer, one of the film's producers, said it was designed to bring the issue into the public realm.

Though it was funded by several conservation organizations, "They want these kinds of discussions to take place," Meyer said.

Producers talked with select fishermen, some of the scientists at the forefront of promoting reserves, state officials and a few fishermen from other parts of the country. The film showed how setting aside areas of "no take" in oceans in other parts of the world produced more fish, thereby benefiting local fishermen and coastal communities. And, in clear, colorful and exciting footage, it showed the wealth of the ocean's treasures on Oregon's doorstep.

Or, in Oregon State University marine scientist Jane Lubchenco's words in the film, the phenomenal diversity and the wealth of plants and animals, she said, listing the numbers of species of invertebrates, fish, marine mammals and birds that call the nearshore waters home.

The arguments presented in the film are the same ones coastal communities, fishery management officials around the country and federal lawmakers have been dealing with for the past few years. How is it possible to balance the needs of the communities that look to the sea to make their livings and protect the resources at the same time?

It comes down to the stakeholders, as Scott Boley, a fisherman from Gold Beach and a member of the Pacific Marine Conservation Council, said in the film. Boley said reserves are another management tool; managers must get the community's input, find a way to enforce the reserve's boundaries and make plans for funding the enforcement and study of the reserves.

The audience of more than 100 - researchers, students, fishermen and local citizens - and panelists discussed community involvement afterward.

The Oregon Ocean Policy Advisory Council, they said, provides a way for the public to do just that. The council considered reserves in 2002 and still is struggling with the issue.

Already, some kinds of marine protected areas are in place, said Oregon Trawl Commission Executive Director Brad Pettinger, who is an OPAC member and also on the discussion panel. More than 75 percent of the waters in the 200-mile federal exclusive economic zone are off-limits to bottom trawling, a change implemented since the documentary was filmed.

"We have done a lot," Pettinger said.

Mark Hixon, an Oregon State University researcher who also was in the film, talked about the extent of marine reserves afterward. One of the biggest questions is: How much of the ocean should be closed? And where should marine reserves be sited?

Hixon said there are different types of marine protected areas, some designed to protect heritage sites, some for particular biological purposes and some, like the reserves shown in the film, for fisheries management. The third kind of reserves, considered permanent closures, are like insurance. They can be used as reference areas and areas that produce spillover effects as more fish reproduce and migrate out of the closed area. Computer modeling, Hixon said, has shown that reserves designed to protect about 30 percent of the fish population are most common.

But another kind of protected areas - a non-permanent one - also can show benefit.

Rolling closures that provide alternate areas of open and closed areas for different periods of time, have benefited scallop fishermen on the East Coast, Pettinger said.

Another issue brought up by a local salmon fisherman was one of cost. Who's going to pay for the research and enforcement of marine reserves?

Already, several fishermen are required to have vessel monitoring systems on their boats - equipment that ties into the global positioning units and reports the vessel's movements to the federal government via satellite. Some fishermen on the East Coast have them and so do some in Hawaii. But they can cost a couple thousand dollars per vessel.

Ed Backus, vice president of Ecotrust's fisheries program, said that for help in cutting down on enforcement costs, people should write their Congressmen and let them know these are important issues for their constituents.

In reality, that doesn't always work.

The federal government paid for the monitoring systems for fishermen on the East Coast, but West Coast groundfish fishermen bore the cost for the systems themselves, despite several pleas to state and federal lawmakers.

"You can't always count on Congress," Pettinger said.

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