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Providing another perspective on fisheries issues....

The Pew Commission – a basis for national ocean policy?

The Pew Oceans Commission (POC) was established with grants from the Pew Trusts (established and controlled by descendants of the founder of the Sun Oil Company and with billions of dollars in assets) of \$5.5 million. In its words, the POC is “conducting a national dialogue on the policies needed to restore and protect living marine resources in U.S. waters. After reviewing the best scientific information available and speaking with people from around the country, the Commission will make its formal recommendations in a report to Congress and the nation in Fall 2002.”¹

Again in its own words (these from a press release on its report “Ecological Effects of Fishing”²) the POC, chaired by Clinton Administration official Leon Panetta, “is conducting the first review of policies and laws needed to sustain and restore living marine resources in over 30 years. The Commission includes leaders from the worlds of science, fishing, conservation, business, and politics.”*

With all of that money and all of those professed good intentions, with someone of Leon Panetta’s stature at the reins, with its own declaration that it will review “the best scientific information available,” and particularly in light of its stated intention of making “formal recommendations in a report to Congress and the nation,” one should expect that the POC folks would carry out an extensive, thorough and unbiased examination of the science pertaining to the current state of the oceans as well as a broad-based evaluation of existing and future threats. And as we consider, for example, the above-mentioned report,³ it appears that’s what was done. In a POC press release we read:

In a new report, Ecological Effects of Fishing in Marine Ecosystems of the United States, prepared for the independent Pew Oceans Commission — the latest in a series of science reports on the threats facing the nation's oceans — scientists find that many current fishing activities are harming the very ecosystems on which future fishing depends, and that this phenomena is worsening.

Leon Panetta, chair of the Pew Oceans Commission, released the report today... “This report is one of many that has been presented to the Commission for our consideration as we arrive at our final recommendations.”

The “independent Pew Oceans Commission” (and incidentally, the U.S. public) has been provided with a “science report” on what “scientists” have found regarding the effects of fishing on the marine environment. The report has been presented to the POC not as a *fait accompli* but rather for “consideration” by Commission members; self-described “leaders from the worlds of science, fishing, conservation, business, and politics.” Sure seems an objective and convincing way of doing it, doesn’t it?

And one would expect that the report’s primary conclusion, which was stated in its introduction, that “using the crudest preindustrial fishing technologies, the human population has derived food from ocean waters, damaged marine habitats, and overfished marine organisms for millennia (Jackson et al., 2001). In the last hundred years, the percentage of marine waters fished, the sheer volume of marine biomass removed from the sea, and the pervasiveness of habitat-altering fishing techniques has cumulatively eroded marine ecosystems’ capacity to withstand either human-induced or natural disturbances,” was arrived at objectively as well. But then we take a closer look at the report. It’s made up of thirty or so pages of text – all focused, of course, on how bad (almost exclusively commercial) fishing is for just about every aspect of the world’s oceans – followed by seven full pages, in smaller type and single spaced, of the 179 references consulted by the authors in preparing their report.

An objective scientific review?

Particularly considering the extensive list of references cited, it seems as if the report’s three authors have done a more than thorough job of reviewing the scientific literature and of synthesizing the state of the science as it exists relative to the ecological effects of fishing.

*The POC includes the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council; the president of the Center for Marine Conservation (now the Ocean Conservancy); a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (which has provided grants to the Conservation Law Foundation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Marine Conservation, the American Oceans Campaign, and Audubon – each of which has contributed significantly to making life miserable and earning a living increasingly difficult and often impossible for large numbers of working fishermen); a trustee of the Packard Foundation (which has provided grants to the Conservation Law Foundation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Marine Conservation, the American Oceans Campaign, Audubon, Environmental Defense - ditto - and SeaWeb – ditto again); the past president of the American Sportfishing Association (which is a member, along with most of the NGOs listed above, of the Pew funded Fish Conservation Network); the president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change; a Pew fellow; and two commercial fishermen, one of whom is the president of a trade association that has been funded by Packard (<http://www.peter.unmack.net/archive/acn/acnljan00/0004.html>) and the other was a trustee of a trade association whose formation was supported by and with other ties to Pew (<http://www.fishingnj.org/namaletter.htm>).

But, being of a somewhat skeptical bent, we took a few more steps in considering the report than a casual – or perhaps an even more intent than casual – reader would. Heeding “Deep Throat’s” Watergate era advice to Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein to follow the money, we identified some of the most obvious funding affiliations of the authors of the report and of the various authors of the references cited in the report.

...or an attempt to push a narrowly focused agenda?

And what we found was kind of surprising. Right off the bat, two of the three authors who contracted with the POC to prepare the report were also recipients of Pew Fellowships. And of the 179 references cited, well over a third had one or more authors who could be directly connected to Pew Trust funding (we emphasize here that we only sought “first generation” funding connections; we didn’t attempt to ferret out all of the authors who were working for organizations, institutions or individuals receiving Pew funds). And when we looked only at those references cited that were authored since 1995 (about the time that the folks at Pew apparently decided that millions of their dollars should be spent to save the world’s oceans from commercial seafood harvesting), almost half were connected to Pew by funding. (A table listing all of the references cited in the report that have authors with obvious Pew connections, what those connections are, and links to web pages showing those connections is available at <http://www.fishingnj.org/impactsreferencestable.htm>)

“From a suite of offices in a high-rise here, a \$4.8 billion foundation called the Pew Charitable Trusts has quietly become not only the largest grant maker to environmental causes, but also one that controls much more than the purse strings.... with its deep pockets and focus on aggressive political advocacy, Pew is not only the most important new player but also the most controversial, among fellow environmentalists.... Until a decade ago, the Pew Trusts...made more conventional environmental grants, financing things like research and land acquisition.... But under (director of environmental programs) Mr. Reichert... the organization has shifted its attention to trying to advance a particular policy....”
From *Charity Is New Force in Environmental Fight*, D. Jehl, NY Times, 06/28/01)

To those readers who aren’t all that familiar with the world of fisheries/ocean research, perhaps a little background is in order at this point. At the end of 2002 the American Fisheries Society (AFS), a professional association to which most of the fisheries scientists in the U.S. (and many from outside the U.S.) belong, had between 8,000 and 9,000 members. There are an awful lot of fisheries scientists, and as even a casual web search will show, many of them are deeply committed to cranking out as many publications as possible (an estimate of an average of one a year a piece probably wouldn’t raise too many eyebrows). Then, along with fisheries scientists, the POC report relied on information supplied by members of a number of other scientific disciplines, including “conservation biologists,” ornithologists, ecologists and social scientists.

Thus the number of articles dealing with fisheries and related subjects in technical journals and reports authored by AFS members and other scientists over the last seven years – representing the full spectrum of disciplines reflected by the references cited in the POC report - could easily number in the tens of thousands. Out of these it’s inconceivable that the report’s three authors – two of who, as noted above, are recipients of Pew fellowships⁴ – didn’t have a pool of thousands of relevant articles and reports to draw upon.

Yet 59 of 128 references from 1995 onward that were cited in the report had at least one author who was part of a small group of about 120 recipients of Pew fellowships (\$150,000 over three years) or an even smaller group of recipients of other Pew fisheries-focused grants.

This might be understandable, considering the rigorous screening process Pew uses to ensure its grantees share the proper “scientific advocacy” philosophy⁵ as well as the subsequent annual investment Pew makes to keep its Fellows in touch.⁶ And it would seem to fit in with the system of issue advocacy and strategic communications sold by Fenton Communications, a public relations firm that lists the Pew Trusts, SeaWeb, the Pew Fellows program and a bunch of NGOs that have been recipients of Pew’s largesse as clients.⁷

But is it, as Mr. Panetta and the Pew Commission so strenuously attempt to persuade us, science of a level that should be guiding - or even influencing - national policy? Can a report that puts so much weight on the writings of a handful of marine scientists who can all be tied to a single funding source with a carefully crafted agenda - and very possibly with the tutelage of a public relations firm with a history of maximally exploiting environmental issues - be objective? Can a commission on which 8 of the 18 members can be linked into a web of organizations and funding sources that so many working fishermen consider inimical to their own interests be considered either objective or independent?

Mr. Panetta wrote in *Our Moment In Time*,⁸ a commentary column for the Santa Barbara News Press on October 27 last year, “Early next year we will present our recommendations to Congress and the nation for a new national ocean policy.” Let us hope that both Congress and the nation consider the Pew Oceans Commission’s recommendations for this new ocean policy in the proper context; as being closely intertwined with a heavily funded, agenda driven campaign by a multi-billion dollar foundation which is directed by the family of the founder of Sun oil⁹. Additionally, lets hope that all of the accolades by the “conservation” organizations that are so dependent on millions of dollars of Pew funding for their marine programs are considered in their proper context as well. And let’s also hope that some consideration will be given to the question of why the Pew Commission, while so capable of focusing on the supposed effects of fishing, is seemingly unwilling to consider the impacts of other ocean activities.

With such a pedigree, how can the POC have such a blind spot?

In 1989 the tanker Exxon Valdez ran into a rock and spilled 11 million gallons of oil into Alaska’s Prince William Sound. While estimates vary, it appears as if the total damages caused by the spill amounted to perhaps five billion dollars.¹⁰ Last November the tanker Prestige, carrying twice as much oil as the Exxon Valdez, broke apart and sank off the coast of Spain. Like the Exxon Valdez, the Prestige was a single-hulled tanker. The sinking of the Prestige, being described as Europe’s worst environmental disaster, could cause long-term damage approaching 10 billion Euros.¹¹

In an interview on the Pew Oceans Commission aired by National Public Radio’s Morning Edition on Christmas day (when

the Atlantic coasts of Spain, France and Portugal either were or were on the verge of being inundated by oil leaking from the hulk of the Prestige), in response to host Bob Edwards' timely comment "You're also dealing with oil spills, with global warming," Commission Chairman Panetta responded "We've touched on the issue of climate change and how that's affecting our oceans. We are also looking at the aqua culture industry, which is a whole growing new industry that has developed, in large measure, because of the loss of fishing stocks that we have in our oceans. The wild fish is diminishing, so what's happening is there's a huge increasing aqua culture industry. What is the affect of that in terms of our oceans? We're looking at pollution that comes from cruise liners. We're looking at what's called invasive species. These are species that are suddenly introduced to an area, because they are carried in the ballast of a lot of ships that go in and out of harbors. San Francisco, for example, has close to 300 invasive species that are now pretty much taking over San Francisco Harbor and destroying a lot of the natural habitat and wildlife that is there." He got in diminished fish stocks and climate change (another major Pew issue), which he was asked about. He got in aquaculture (ditto), cruise line pollution, and invasive species (also ditto), which he wasn't. But the Chairman of the Pew Oceans Commission somehow missed oil spills, which neither he nor the Commission seems to be dealing with, in spite of Mr. Edward's obvious interest.

Mr. Edwards, who was somewhat less than bull-doggedly tenacious in the interview (NPR and its affiliates have received millions of dollars of Pew funding), didn't follow up on the POC and oil spills. It's unfortunate that he didn't ask Mr. Panetta how many single-hulled tankers sail in and out of our harbors and how the threat they pose compares to the threat of invasive species. In all likelihood there are more than a handful of people who's lives revolved around Prince William Sound or the Galician coast who would be more than willing to trade a few lampreys, mitten crabs and zebra mussels for millions of gallons of spilled oil. According to the Associated Press,¹² "despite the phasing out of single-hulled tankers, of the 64 tankers plying the East Coast and Gulf of Mexico only 22 are double-hulled, according to the American Shipping Association. And of the 22 carrying crude oil from Alaska to the lower 48 states, six are double-hulled." (A transcript of Mr. Panetta's interview can be purchased through the Morning Edition website.¹³)

Another Pew Oceans Commission report, this one supposedly dealing with marine pollution, covers the entire topic of ocean-based oil pollution with the two statements "oil pollution from ships, accidental spills, and production activities has decreased" and "pollutant levels have also been reduced in discharges from industries, including oil and gas production;" along with a cavalier dismissal of other operational oil discharges from ships. The 10,000 or so Spanish fishermen that the Prestige disaster has put out of work probably won't find much comfort in this. Nor will the Alaskan fishermen still seeking billions of dollars in damages from the oil industry following the Exxon Valdez spill. Perhaps the Pew Commission should have held one of its field hearings in Spain or Alaska. That might have given Mr. Panetta a more realistic picture of what's really capable of "destroying a lot of the

natural habitat and wildlife" on the Galician coast, in San Francisco Bay and just about anywhere else single hulled tankers are in operation.

An objective report by an independent commission.....

representing the actual state of fisheries and ocean science and culminating in recommendations serving the best interests of all of our citizens, or something else entirely? When Members of Congress (and the American people) consider the POC's interim and final reports and the attendant praise from researchers and NGOs that are on the Pew "payroll," that question should be the first and last they ask.

Pew and ocean issues

One of Pew's initial efforts to influence public opinion on ocean issues was spearheaded by the Pew funded SeaWeb. On its web site, SeaWeb describes itself as a "project designed to raise awareness of the world ocean and the life within it." Early in its existence, SeaWeb commissioned a public opinion survey to determine which ocean issues would best "engage the public interest." The introduction to the results of the survey, which was conducted for SeaWeb by the Mellman Group, stated "Americans believe the ocean's problems stem from many sources, but oil companies are seen as a prime culprit: In fact, 81% of Americans believe that oil spills are a very serious problem. This is followed by chemical runoff from large corporate farms (75% very serious), improperly treated water from towns near the coast (69%), contaminated seafood (65%), and trash, oil, and chemical runoff from streets (65%)." Overfishing evidently wasn't considered "a very serious problem" and had to be lumped in with "the loss of critical species" to make the cut as a "meaningful indicator" of trouble. But in an article on the poll in SeaWeb's November 1996 monthly update, the only specific threat to the oceans mentioned was overfishing. Along with three paragraphs of vague generalities was this statement: "71% (of respondents) agree that overfishing is threatening the health and stability of the marine environment."¹⁴ Nothing about oil spills, runoff, contaminated seafood, or any of the other real problems identified by respondents in the survey, only overfishing. (this information was originally printed in a column by N. Stolpe in Commercial Fisheries News) Evidently the Pew myopia about what's really going on in the oceans isn't a recent development.

References

- 1 Pew Oceans Commission mission statement at <http://www.pewoceans.org/mission.asp>
- 2 http://www.pewoceans.org/articles/2002/10/25/pr_29888.asp
- 3 Available at http://www.pewoceans.org/oceanfacts/2002/10/25/fact_29889.asp
- 4 For particulars see <http://pewmarine.org/FellowshipGuidelines/administration.html>
- 5 <http://pewmarine.org/FellowshipGuidelines/categories.html>
- 6 See <http://pewmarine.org/2002AMBooklet.PDF>
- 7 See the Fenton Communications website at <http://www.fenton.com/clients/default.asp>; for how Fenton works, see http://www.usatoday.com/money/autos/2003-01-23-suvattacks_x.htm, for a more "aggressive" perspective on Fenton Communications go to the Activist Cash website (<http://www.activistcash.com/>) and look up "David Fenton."
- 8 http://www.pewoceans.org/articles/2002/10/25/pr_29891.asp
- 9 <http://www.pewtrusts.org/about/index.cfm?image=img2> and click on "Board and Staff"
- 9 Exxon Valdez fact sheet, People for Puget Sound, http://www.pugetsound.org/evx/fact_sheet.html
- 10 Spanish oil spill clean up to cost 1 billion (Euros), Deutsche Presse-Agentur, 1/12/03
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- 12 <http://discover.npr.org/rundowns/rundown.jhtml?prgId=3&prgDate=December/25/2002>
- 13 <http://www.seaweb.org/resources/1update/amaze.html>

More information on this and other fisheries issues is available on the NJ Fishing website at <http://www.fishingnj.org>