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Providing another perspective on fisheries issues....

Enviros' "survey" promotes untested no-fishing zones

The idea of establishing large areas of ocean, inaccurately and misleadingly referred to as marine protected areas, in which extractive activities like fishing are totally banned has gained a significant amount of acceptance in anti-fishing circles over the past five or so years. The sentiment, as expressed stridently by select members of the marine research and conservationist communities, is that if these areas, which are in actuality no-take rather than protected, are established on a large scale, they will be able to save the world's oceans from the ruin that is otherwise imminent. In an ongoing assault through a series of articles and interviews, we've been inflicted with a parade of apparently independent scientists and conservationists in one breath bemoaning the fate of our oceans and in the next extolling the virtues of extensive areas being turned into no-take zones.

What is a Marine Protected Area (MPA)?

Executive Order 13158 (05/26/00) defines marine protected areas (MPAs) as "any area of the marine environment that has been reserved by Federal, State, territorial, tribal, or local laws or regulations to provide lasting protection for part or all of the natural and cultural resources therein." Plainly, MPAs have been and continue to be in widespread use in U.S. and international waters by fisheries managers for decades (see the box at the top of pg. 3). Our "conservationist" colleagues, however, seem to be confusing MPAs with no-take zones, areas from which all resource extraction - particularly fishing - is banned.

However, the available pool of support for no-take zones apparently wasn't considered adequate to advance the agenda of a group of environmentalist organizations which have been acting as the cheerleading squad for the no-take zone campaign. A coalition of these groups, including the Conservation Law Foundation, the Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense and World Wildlife Fund Canada, therefore hired Edge Research, a Washington, DC firm that "provides marketing, planning, and strategic communication efforts" to "corporations, non-profit organizations and governmental clients" to give their cause even more of a boost.

Edge Research accordingly conducted a survey of 750 residents of the New England states and the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia, supposedly to gauge the level of acceptance of the idea that the public should be willing to

accept sacrifices – those associated with an extensive series of no-take zones – in order to "save the oceans."

"Reporting on a survey by a special-interest group is tricky. For example, an environmental group trumpets a poll saying the American people support strong measures to protect the environment. That may be true, but the poll was conducted for a group with definite views. That may have swayed the question wording, the timing of the poll, the group interviewed and the order of the questions. You should examine the poll to be certain that it accurately reflects public opinion and does not simply push a single viewpoint." (from National Council on Public Polls - <http://www.ncpp.org/qajsa.htm#13> - **20 Questions A Journalist Should Ask About Poll Results.** S.R. Gawiser and G.E. Witt)

Needless to say, the results of this survey were enthusiastically reported to any receptive media outlets by the various organizations that have hitched their wagons to unfounded gloom and doom predictions of the future of the world's oceans due to seafood harvesting. Those results were that the public would enthusiastically and overwhelmingly support locking fishermen out of large areas of ocean and would be willing to accept the attendant sacrifices. From a press release by the Conservation Law Foundation on February 16 "A poll shows the public strongly favors more fully protected marine areas in New England and Atlantic Canada...."

Also needless to say – at least for us if not for the reporters who looked no farther than the environmentalist's press announcements – such a survey, with its far-reaching public policy implications, deserves a serious level of scrutiny, which we afforded it.

Before looking at the survey itself, we visited the Edge Research website (<http://www.edgeresearch.com/>). While the apparent intent of the environmentalist organizations that hired Edge Research was to present their work product, the poll and its interpretation, as an objective "scientific" effort, in their own words the people at Edge were hired for anything but their objectivity. In their words "Strategic market research allows you to know your audience – what they want to see and hear, as well as how, when and where they want to see and hear it.... We work with our clients to ensure they are performing the right research to achieve their objectives."

(We also noted with interest that Lisa Dropkin, one of Edge Research's four listed "principals," was previously the Director of Research at Pew's SeaWeb.)

While the idea of performing research to allow clients to achieve their objectives is certainly understandable from a marketing perspective, it sure isn't science and it's a couple of orders of magnitude removed from objectivity.

Then, getting to the poll, as far as this or any other is concerned, we've found four questions helpful in considering its validity. Why was it designed/commissioned? Are the questions and the support material in it "value neutral?" Is the material in it factual? Are its results interpreted accurately?

Why the poll?

The fact that a self-described "strategic market research" firm designed and conducted this survey and interpreted the results speaks eloquently to the first question. Edge Research isn't in business to tell its clients - in this case the Conservation Law Foundation and several other organizations with an extensive track record of actions that have cost the commercial fishing industry millions of dollars - what the target audience - the citizens of New England and Atlantic Canada - wants. It's to tell the clients how they can "sell" their product - in this case banning fishing from large areas of ocean. The Conservation Law Foundation isn't interested in finding out how the public feels about excluding fishermen from areas they have worked in for generations, apparently, but in actually doing whatever is necessary to exclude them - and Edge Research was hired to provide them with a tool to do it.

Are the questions in it value-neutral?

In their question examining which factors should take precedence when considering "*restricting economic activities in the ocean*," respondents could chose between "*short term costs in lost jobs, higher prices for goods and services and impacts on families whose livelihood depends on ocean resources*" or "*long term benefits of healthier and more plentiful resources or fishing and increased tourism to restored ocean places that will improve life for coastal communities and future generations for years to come.*" Some choice!

Can wording of questions bias poll results?

How questions in a poll are worded is as important as sampling procedure in obtaining valid results. Questions are checked for balance, that is, are they worded in a neutral fashion without taking sides on an issue? Does the question represent both sides of an issue fairly? (from National Council on Public Polls FAQ <http://www.ncpp.org/faq.htm#7>)

All things being equal, it's hard to imagine how anyone would choose costs rather than benefits, particularly if the costs were represented as being paid by a specific group (almost undoubtedly a group not represented in the small sample) for a short

time, and if the benefits were represented as being accrued by the entire community for both "future generations" and "for years to come." While this seems a great way to get the kind of answer you're looking for (77% of the Canadians and 76% of the New Englanders favored the benefits over the costs), it's hard to imagine that the same ratio of responses wouldn't apply just as well to a wide range of similarly biased "costs and benefits" questions restricting economic - or most other kinds of - activities anywhere.

Is the material in it factual?

In the survey the pollsters wrote "*Currently, we protect less than 1% of our ocean waters, To preserve this beautiful resource, we need to protect more.*" The idea that such a miniscule amount of ocean is "protected" would be sure to guarantee that a large proportion of the people polled provided the desired response; that more of the ocean needed to be protected (and so responded 62% of the Canadians and 53% of the New Englanders).

Partial listing of New England/Mid-Atlantic Areas with commercial fishing restrictions/prohibitions

Northeast Multispecies Regulated Mesh Area - Minimum mesh size to protect groundfish under the Multi-species FMP (100% of EEZ is affected) - <http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/ro/doc/info1.pdf>

Northeast Multispecies Closed Areas - Seasonal and permanent closures for vessels using particular types of gear (ca 50% of EEZ) - <http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/ro/doc/info4.pdf>

Marine Mammal Closed Areas - All persons owning or operating gillnet vessels must remove all gillnet gear capable of catching multispecies from the following areas (up to 8 month "seasonal" closures - various gear restrictions/prohibitions for ca. 75% of the EEZ) waters - <http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/ro/doc/info5.pdf>

Gear Restricted Areas - Various seasonal restrictions on gear used as required by the Scup FMP and gear conflict controls - (ca 10% of EEZ) - <http://www.nero.nmfs.gov/ro/doc/info7.pdf>

But, as anyone who has even a rudimentary knowledge of fisheries management off New England and Atlantic Canada knows, far more than 1% of these waters are already protected. Tens of thousands of square miles are closed to all or to particular types of fishing either permanently or seasonally. These closures, which are in place to protect particular fish stocks, marine mammals, spawning aggregations, migration pathways, sensitive habitat, research areas, etc., etc. affect scallopers, groundfish fishermen, longliners, gillnetters, recreational anglers and pot/trap fishermen. But it's a fairly safe bet that it's easier to sell the idea of protecting more of the ocean from fishing once you've made the case that virtually none of the ocean is presently protected, isn't it? So, regardless of the actual facts, that's the case that was made.

Are the results interpreted accurately?

The respondents were asked to rate the overall health of the ocean and the commercial fishing industry locally (New England or Atlantic Canada). The possible choices were Excel-

The Survey is available on the Conservation Law Foundation website at <http://www.clf.org/hot/20020216.htm>

lent, Good, Fair and Poor (or Don't Know). On these questions the pollsters wrote "*Regionally, residents are divided in their assessment of the overall health of the ocean: 46% rate it positively (5% excellent, 41% good) and 43% rate it negatively (36% only fair, 7% poor).*" Then, regarding the commercial fishing industry, "*59% say the health of the fishery is in only 'fair-to-poor' shape compared to 28% who think it is in good shape.*"

Rate "Overall health of the ocean"		
	Atlantic Canada	New England
Excellent	3%	5%
Good	34%	42%
Fair	43%	34%
Poor	11%	7%
Don't know	9%	13%

Rate "Health of the commercial fishing industry"		
	Atlantic Canada	New England
Excellent	4%	4%
Good	21%	25%
Fair	33%	34%
Poor	32%	24%
Don't know	11%	13%

"fair." It seems like at this level of polling the old adage "you get what you pay for" is really taken seriously.

Summing it up, it appears that we have what is being presented by the staff of The Conservation Law Foundation and their cronies as an objective poll that shows that "the public" fully and enthusiastically supports their contention that the oceans and the fishing industry are in dire straits and will only be saved by the institution of no-take areas and other equally stringent measures, and that same "public" approves of the attendant "short term costs" that such measures will entail. But that "objective" poll is based on value-laden phraseology, on misstated facts and on distorted and tortured interpretations of elementary English.

The first question that comes to mind is "why do the Conservation Law Foundation, Environmental Defense, the Natural Resources Defense Council and Edge Research's other clients feel this is necessary?" Anyone who has spent any time enmeshed in the fisheries management process, either at first hand or through following the literature, is aware that representatives of these organizations go to great pains to let it be known that they are there representing the public's interests. If they are there "for the public," one might hope that they have at least an inkling of why "the public" wants them there.

Yet here we have them invested in a project - supposedly a "public opinion" survey - ostensibly to find out what the public thinks, but with all the appearances of being designed and interpreted to do something else entirely.

If you want to find out what the public thinks, you do it with a carefully designed and administered survey. You do it by asking questions with no built-in biases. You do it by providing the respondents with accurate information. And you do it by objectively interpreting the responses you receive.

If, on the other hand, you want to sell a product or a position, you toss all of the objectivity and all of the rigorous analysis out the window. In the words of Edge Research, their job is to ensure that their clients are "*performing the right research to achieve their objectives.*" And that's OK if your organization is selling widgets or doodads to the wary consumer. We're all aware of the liberties that advertisers take when extolling the virtues of their products over those of their competitors, *caveat emptor* keeps us on our toes and consumer protection regulations keep us out of trouble. But when your organization is selling "public" policies to a trusting public, shouldn't you be looking to a higher standard?

The pollsters at Edge Research – or, as is becoming increasingly evident, "marketers" is a much more appropriate description – have arbitrarily (and kind of amazingly) decided that the "fair" responses belonged in the negative category. This goes against any use of the word "fair" that we're familiar with, but, to be on the safe side, we checked our understanding of the meaning of the word with the definitions offered in several dictionaries. In its context in the survey, "fair" is defined as "adequate" or "average" or, and this might be stretching a bit, "sufficient but not ample." In no way do any of the definitions we came across indicate anything remotely approaching negative or substandard. And it's impossible to imagine that the respondent's understanding of the English language didn't reflect that. Yet, by arbitrarily using the terms "only fair" and "fair-to-poor" the "pollsters" conveniently interpreted all of the "fair" responses as negative.

How about if, instead, the Edge Research team had interpreted "fair" as all of the rest of the English speaking world understands the word? Then they would have written something on the order of "*80% of the Atlantic Canadians and 81% of the New Englanders sampled felt that the health of the ocean was average or better and 58% and 63% felt that the health of the fishing industry ranged from excellent to adequate.*"

This would hardly appear to be the message that the Conservation Law Foundation and Edge Research's other clients were looking for, nor would it be a message that supported either their contention that massive areas of the ocean needed to be blocked off from traditional users or that we were on or beyond the verge of an ocean "crisis." So what did the Edge Research "pollsters" do? Apparently, they redefined the word

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