Zoning for Oceans

The time when we could do anything we want anywhere we want in the oceans is over

BY THE EDITORS

For decades the seas off U.S. shores have been roiled by controversies over where to drill for oil, how to reel in overfishing, and whom to blame for toxic streams of continental runoff. A failure to manage these problems effectively has already put the nation’s oceanic realms in serious jeopardy. And now we are inviting new industries to stake their own claims on the blue frontier. To generate clean energy from wind and tides, we need permanent installations. To grow more food, we need offshore farms.

Without a plan to manage these proliferating activities, they are very likely to exacerbate the existing shambles. President Barack Obama turned a spotlight to this challenge in June, when he charged an interagency task force with detailing the country’s first national ocean policy. Its official report is due out this month, but a draft hints at a bold way of reconciling our competing needs and interests, both economic and environmental: zoning U.S. waters (which extend 200 nautical miles from the coast) much the way we zone our cities and public lands [see “Ocean Overhaul,” by Sarah Simpson, on page 54].

Precedent for this approach comes from a fisheries management strategy that has shown great promise in recent years, called catch shares. Unlike traditional fish quotas, which typically ignite a race among fishers to haul in the largest possible share of allowable catch, catch-share schemes allocate shares of the fisherywide quota before the season starts. Secure in the number of fish they can catch, fishers are free to plan how and when to do their work, making them more likely to prioritize practices that do not damage fish habitat and thereby maintain their ability to catch more fish in future years. In some cases, conservation advocates can buy an individuals’ shares in exchange for their not fishing at all. So far the U.S. uses catch shares to manage 12 commercial fish stocks, including halibut, pollock and Atlantic cod.

Catch shares integrate the economic and environmental sides of fisheries management. Zoning would do the same on a broader scale. Currently our system of ocean governance is piecemeal. Since the early 1900s the U.S. has been coming to terms (or not) with its impact on the marine realm one problem at a time. Today some 20 different federal agencies each manage their own use, typically without regard to what the others are doing. And none looks out for the overall health of the oceans. Community and environmental groups have stepped into the breach, but their main tool is litigation—which is blunt, expensive and divisive.

The draft policy of the presidential task force recommends the creation of a National Ocean Council to coordinate the various agencies. Zoning goes further. You don’t need traffic lights if there isn’t much traffic, but as a frontier village becomes a bustling city, the pioneers need a comprehensive plan, and they need maps telling everyone what they can do where. Extending this “planning and zoning” paradigm offshore makes good sense. Zoning would give all parties with a stake in the seas the security of knowing certain spaces are designated for their desired uses. Commerce benefits because environmental groups are less likely to block industry on a case-by-case basis. Marine ecosystems benefit because conservation finally gets an equal seat at the planning table with the fishing and petroleum industries. A pioneering zone map set up by Australia some three decades ago helped to save the Great Barrier Reef.

To set up the zones requires good science. Evidence clearly shows that areas around estuaries, coastal wetlands, reefs and submarine mountains are among the most important to protect, whereas a sandy bottom already degraded by coastal pollution might be a good spot to authorize, say, sand and gravel mining. Creating tradable rights and subleasing options within the zoning system could give groups additional incentives to cooperate. The managers of a conservation zone could sell rights to fish in their zone in exchange for increased conservation practices in a fishing zone. Or a wind farm could sublease the rights to the aquaculture underneath its turbines.

The risk is that the zoning idea will get mired in decades-long debates while the oceans continue to deteriorate. The U.S. needs to act with urgency. As other nations do the same, they can work together to manage the high seas that are the domain of no single country. Cooperation is no longer optional; it is essential. We don’t have another 100 years to get it right.