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Tundi's Take: We must consider not only what we take out of the sea, but also what we put into it

By Tundi Agardy, MEAM Contributing Editor. tundiagardy@earthlink.net

Honest dialogue about what are acceptable uses of the sea and coasts can only be good. It forces us to take stock of what we know, and likewise forces us - as users and as nations - to put our desires and needs on the table. While those desires and needs vary from sector to sector and from place to place, we all share a global ambition to use marine resources and space wisely so as not to risk ecological imbalance, economic and environmental vulnerability, and conflict.

But for far too long the focus has been on resource extraction - especially fisheries - while the myriad other ways we run those aforementioned risks are seemingly ignored.

Don't get me wrong. Excessive extraction of living and non-living resources from the sea has restructured marine ecosystems, caused declines in biodiversity and in much-valued productivity, and exacted costs borne not by the extractive industries doing the taking but rather by the coastal communities living nearby, and the rest of us, too. I get it, and fully endorse the notion that creating no-take areas is a necessity if we are to practice effective EBM. And I even understand why campaigners have had to reduce the highly complex challenges of marine conservation down to a few simple rules, creating a storyline for the public that casts conservation as a struggle between "good" (non-extractive uses) and "evil" (extractive uses). In some popular storylines, we even posit the "supreme": no use, or what my Italian colleagues used to call "no go" - marine wilderness made pure by the absence of humans.

It is okay to be nature-centric. But it is not okay to be delusional. Fact is, there are no pristine wilderness areas anymore. Marine debris, chemical pollutants, alien species, and noise find their way to every corner of the ocean realm. These stressors are not trivial, especially when occurring cumulatively over time. What we put into the sea, through direct dumping, indirect operational discharge, run-off, and atmospheric loading, may have more profound effects on ecosystem function than what we take out. And when we couple these other impacts with those caused by extractive industries - like physical destruction caused by large scale fisheries, oil and gas, or seabed mining - we push these systems perilously close to collapse. We must think holistically, and address all uses and impacts systematically, if we are to avoid that.

We have created a paradox. On the one hand, we demonize extractive industries because they take too much resource out. On the other, we often avoid the difficulties inherent in dealing with extractive industries when practicing MSP or undertaking EBM: we let them opt out of the process if they want, or we avoid engaging them all together. We need a more mature approach - one that accepts humans as a part of natural ecosystems, considers all of the ways we impact the seas, allows for sustainable use wherever that is truly achievable, and harnesses the best available tools to help us decide which of all uses, and what levels of use, are acceptable where.

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