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Tundi's Take: Can the private sector rescue the oceans?

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Government institutions all over the world seem to be in upheaval. Many are behaving erratically or unpredictably, whether in North America, Europe, or Asia. What does this portend for marine management?

The vast majority of the government (and by extension, multilateral) institutions that are in flux seem intent on shifting resources away from defending the public good and are instead desperately flexing military muscle in a show of nationalistic bravado. What counts in these places is talk and action that can make the public feel good, instantly. Careful long-term planning is being relegated to the back seat. These countries with their crisis mentality are casting environmental protection as a luxury they can ill-afford – an anti-job preoccupation that is 'weak' according to many politicians. Monitoring and research programs are being slashed, of course. Even more disturbing is that governments seem to be extinguishing proactive thinking and destroying ideologies that favor sustainability.

I am not speaking here exclusively about the US – though we seem to be the most visible, and perhaps the most entertaining, in the great unraveling. Other more sober and rational governments in Europe, Asia, and Africa are also abandoning systematic, science-based planning and management, and instead adopting ill-conceived defensive postures and growth-at-any-price attitudes. In the US, the latest budget put forward by the new presidential administration takes funding away from critical earth monitoring satellites, not to mention the US Environmental Protection Agency. President Obama's executive orders establishing marine monuments are being rolled back. And in the UK, bracing for Brexit is leading to belt-tightening that bodes poorly for conservation and marine planning. In the Philippines, the new hostile attitude toward the US undermines multi-lateral protections in disputed areas. In South Africa, the disarray in government and the thirst for economic development has caused the careful MSP that was underway to stall. The disorder and social discord that result can only breed management incompetence – and that does not bode well for the future of our oceans or our planet.

Talked down from the ledge?

My mother, ever the optimist and soother of frayed nerves, keeps calling me to relate any good news she's heard about how businesses have assumed leadership on the environmental front. It is more than talking me off the ledge – she has been convinced by the mainstream media that everything will be all right after all. What she is thinking about specifically is climate change – and even more specifically, the saving of the [Paris Agreement](#). In this regard, the private sector knows that environmental degradation in the form of global warming and attendant sea level rise hurts their bottom dollar. There is a strong business case to be made – and has been made – that cooperation to mitigate climate change and invest in adaptation strategies makes good business sense. It protects investments, minimizes risk, and creates better opportunities for expanding markets and growing strong economies. Of course the private sector will pick up the ball dropped by reticent, distracted governments.

What I don't have the heart to tell my mother is that this is probably too little, too late, and even if it weren't, climate change is only one of our worries. Look behind the blaring headlines about the [demise of the Great Barrier Reef due to climate change](#) to a paper that got less fanfare – [an appraisal of coral death as a function of hypoxia brought about by land-based sources of pollution](#). Now that is a tough nut to crack – land-based pollution from rivers, road run-off, polluted aquifers, and the atmosphere. So even if one only looks at the issue of how global climate change will affect ocean health and productivity, the fact is that no amount of mitigation and adaptation will work in the absence of good, holistic management of ocean uses and impacts that keeps ecosystems healthy and functional. And holistic, ecosystem-based, science-based planning and management are the very things governments seem ready to abandon.

So can private sector step up, lean in, save us?

It is true that there are many examples of businesses taking the lead, forging partnerships, stimulating innovation, and applying solutions to marine management problems. I'm currently in Belize for Coastal Awareness Week, and we have been hearing compelling cases where the private sector has not only done the right thing and developed coastal tourism sustainably, but has also acted in a way that ultimately shaped policy for the public good. The [sustainably-developed Long Caye](#) is one example of this occurring in Belize.

There are many other cases from other parts of the world where the private sector assumed leadership and pushed for real change. A few months ago, MEAM featured the [efforts of GreenWave 3D Ocean Farming](#), an initiative that goes beyond training aquaculturists to grow seaweed and shellfish profitably. GreenWave also builds the capacity of rookie ocean farmers to create new markets and demonstrate effective – if small scale – marine EBM.

Another example of the private sector stepping up and fostering solutions to marine management problems is the [Ocean Impact Alliance](#). This rapidly growing initiative matches investors with eco-entrepreneurs offering innovations useful to marine businesses. Ocean Impact is more than a solutions database, however. The initiative works with solution providers to build their capacity to market their innovations, while at the same time helping investors assess the possible returns on their investments.

An even more recent development, [WaterEvolution](#) is engaging maritime industries in protecting oceans by assessing how efficiencies in production, operations, and even product disposal can cut costs. Portions of these savings are then rolled back into marine management and conservation. This is less about image and corporate social responsibility, and more about allowing the private sector to invest in the resource base that makes their businesses profitable in the first place. By doing so, WaterEvolution can drive best practices in EBM and even governance and policy.

Only governments can secure the oceans commons

But all this well-intentioned and innovative private sector involvement really doesn't add up to much, yet. The private sector can lead by example, but that leadership is

patchwork, and only a drop in the ocean. Governments, and only governments, working to secure the interests of their citizens, can direct the large-scale policies and programs that can secure the ocean commons. And only governments working together can forge the sort of holistic, long-range approaches that can protect the integrity of marine systems and ensure that the benefits from healthy oceans are available to all.

To tie this diatribe into the theme of this issue of MEAM ~~–the power of technology to improve ocean planning and management–~~ I worry that the retreat of governments could tip the use of technology in the wrong direction. The use of drones to monitor location of living resources, the use of satellite imagery to track changes to the physical environment, the use of cell phones and social media to report illegal activity - the list goes on – all these technologies in the hands of those who exploit the oceans for financial gain could lead to unfair competitiveness and an inability to manage oceans for the public interest.

Governments always need to prioritize, and in financially insecure times like these, to practice austerity. But this is unlike lean periods of the past. There seems to be a wholesale shirking of responsibility for safeguarding public spaces that is unprecedented. The claim that the markets and the private sector can do it instead seems a pitiful way to soothe public concern, even if it makes my mom, and the rest of us, feel better.

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