

# FOREWORD

This new edition of *Our Living Oceans* serves as a major yardstick to measure the success of managing our Nation's living marine resources since the last report was released in 1999. In addition to detailing the status of the Nation's living marine resources, this report also focuses on the steps that the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS) has taken to end overfishing and reduce bycatch, and spotlights what is known and what still remains unknown about fishery stocks and protected resources.

The passage of the Magnuson-Stevens Reauthorization Act of 2006 (MSRA) has changed the landscape of fisheries management. In addition to its requirement to end overfishing by 2010, the Act requires expanded fishery management tools (including market-based management approaches, e.g. "catch shares"), a larger role for science in the fishery management process (including improved recreational data collection and strengthened peer-review processes), and enhanced international cooperation (to address illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing and bycatch of protected species). The keys to achieving sustainable fishery stocks, and local communities dependent upon them, are ending overfishing and rebuilding overfished stocks. The agency and the Nation we serve face new and emerging challenges: setting effective and accurate annual catch limits, conserving and rehabilitating the marine and freshwater habitats needed to sustain fishery stocks, recovering endangered species and protecting those at risk of becoming endangered, creating successful limited access privilege programs that help provide for sustainable and safe fisheries, and designing ecosystem-based management plans that consider multiple uses of marine ecosystems, including fisheries and a wide range of other societal needs.

NMFS has been working to anticipate and meet emerging management and conservation challenges. The NMFS Strategic Plan for Fish-

eries Research, published in 2007, describes the agency's research priorities for the next 5 years and provides a framework for targeting NOAA's resources to best meet science and management needs. The NOAA Fleet Recapitalization Plan, released in October 2008, outlines NOAA's plans to replace its aging fleet of sea-going vessels, the primary platforms for collecting fishery-independent data, which is vital for assessing stocks and managing fisheries. Updating the NOAA fleet will give us the tools to build capacity and collect more, and more comprehensive, data to better manage living marine resources. NMFS is also working with industry and academic partners to develop advanced sampling technologies that will further enhance data collection and the fisheries management that depends on those data.

In order to better meet the Nation's stewardship responsibilities for the oceans, coasts, and Great Lakes, the Obama Administration established an Interagency Ocean Policy Task Force (OPTF) to be led by the Chair of the Council on Environmental Quality. On 10 September 2009 the Obama Administration released the interim Ocean Policy Task Force report. The OPTF report provides proposals for a comprehensive national approach to uphold stewardship responsibilities and ensure accountability. It outlines a more balanced, productive and sustainable approach to managing ocean resources focusing on an integrated and science-based approach to ecosystem protection and restoration strategies. It calls out as a priority the importance of the "protection, maintenance, and restoration of populations and essential habitats supporting fisheries, protected species, ecosystems, and biological diversity."

The United States has some of the strongest marine resource legislation in the world, and passage of the MSRA gives NMFS critically needed tools to effectively manage our Nation's living marine resources for the sustainable use and enjoyment by this and future generations. This report

serves as a report card to the Nation on the status of our living marine resources, but it will also serve as a baseline for measuring future progress under the MSRA mandates and meeting the requirements and initiatives of the OPTF. While we will eliminate known overfishing on Federally managed stocks in 2010, we know that it will take time to restore those populations—but recover they will if we are vigilant in keeping fishing mortality within sustainable limits. We expect

that comparisons of future reports with this one will show continued improvements in the status and health of stocks, as well as increases in knowledge about those stocks.

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October 2009

# PREFACE

This is the sixth edition of *Our Living Oceans. Report on the Status of U.S. Living Marine Resources* to be released since the inaugural edition was published in November 1991. These publications serve as a series of National status reviews by the National Marine Fisheries Service. The reports are neither mandated nor intended to fulfill any legal requirement. Instead, the purpose of *Our Living Oceans* from the beginning has been to provide a report card to the American public on the biological health of U.S. living marine resources. Additional reports in this series were released in 1992, 1993, 1995, and 1999. Over time, this reporting effort has evolved from a 1-year cycle to a multiyear cycle so as to better reflect the extended time periods often required to observe and document change in biological populations and the marine environment.

Building on the reception of the biological report card, *Our Living Oceans. The Economic Status of U.S. Fisheries* was released to the American public in December 1996. This companion report defined and characterized economic sustainability in the Nation's fisheries, and presented a preliminary assessment of their economic health. An update to the 1996 Economics report is currently underway. Work on a third report that will present an initial

assessment of the status and health of marine and coastal habitats important to living marine resources is nearing completion. When *Our Living Oceans: Habitat. Status of the Habitat of U.S. Living Marine Resources* is released in the near future, the envisioned *Our Living Oceans* series covering stock status, economics, and habitat will be in place.

*Our Living Oceans 6<sup>th</sup> Edition* presents new data analyses focusing on the principal fishery resources, marine mammals, and sea turtles that are under the management jurisdiction of the National Marine Fisheries Service. Living marine resources in this report are discussed in terms of seven regional ecosystems around the United States: Northeast Shelf, Southeast Shelf, Gulf of Mexico, Caribbean Sea, California Current, Alaska Ecosystem Complex, and Pacific Islands Ecosystem Complex, plus Highly Migratory Species. The information reported is drawn from stock assessment reports, field surveys, biological and physical studies, and independent monitoring of recreational, subsistence, and commercial fisheries. As with previous editions of *Our Living Oceans*, this publication and the data presented are the result of the collective efforts of National Marine Fisheries Service staff from around the country. The principal contributors to this report are listed in Appendix 1.