

## The anti-fishing movement; a U.S. perspective

Nils E. Stolpe

(Originally printed in Fishing News International, October 2008)

In the U.S., commercial fishing was once considered a valued profession by virtually everyone. In recent years that has changed, or perhaps “is being changed” is more accurate. A massive, heavily funded and well orchestrated campaign has eroded the image of commercial fishermen. Over a decade of relentless media assaults, anti-fishing propaganda in the truest sense is resulting in the increasing marginalization of fishermen in fisheries management and ocean governance.

For the record, from a resource perspective things aren't bad here. Like always, some stocks are up and some are down. The New England groundfish fishery, the supposed “poster child” for mismanagement, has stocks at both high and low levels, with total biomass well above the problematic levels of the late 80s and early 90s and exhibiting a pronounced upward recent trend (see <http://www.nefsc.noaa.gov/publications/crd/crd0815/wp2-1.pdf>). Major Alaskan fisheries, among the largest in the world, and the East coast sea scallop fishery, the most valuable in the U.S., are in fine shape, as are many others. Aggregate landings in the U.S. in 1950 and 2004 were virtually identical, at 1.218 million tons and 1.186 million tons respectively. In spite of this, much of the U.S. public has been convinced that there's a fishing spawned crisis in our oceans.

Remember the Exxon Valdez?

In 1989 she split open after hitting a reef, dumping 40 million liters of crude oil into pristine Prince William Sound in Alaska. The environmental damage was immense. So was the public outrage it generated. The oil industry became the focus of an unprecedented amount of public and political scrutiny, and Exxon became the target in law suits seeking billions of dollars in compensatory and punitive damages. As we will see below, this disaster went far in convincing the public that an inadequately regulated “Big Oil” industry was the greatest threat our oceans were facing.

Leaping ahead, in 1995 the multi-billion dollar Pew Charitable Trusts, one of the largest not-for-profits in the U.S., invested over \$4 million in the startup of SeaWeb. The Pew Trusts were established and controlled by the heirs of Sun Oil founder Joseph Pew and his wife Mary. From the SeaWeb website “*at the time, no single, credible organization existed that presented the ocean crisis to media and others in an interrelated, consistent and systematic way.*”

What was the ocean crisis that the Pew people had recognized and SeaWeb was created to address? One of the first undertakings of the new organization, a poll grandiloquently named “The SeaWeb/Mellman Group Landmark Poll on US Public Attitudes Towards the Oceans,” was commissioned to shed some light on this question.

Not surprisingly (remember that oil-soaked wildlife and destroyed shorelines from the Exxon Valdez disaster and the subsequent clean-up had been seared into the public consciousness a few years earlier), oil was seen as the biggest threat to the oceans. As reported in the Mellman Group's introduction and notes on the poll, “*Americans believe the ocean's problems stem from many sources, but oil companies are seen as a prime culprit. The publicity around oil spills in the ocean has undoubtedly led to the perception that these accidents account for the majority of the ocean's pollution. In fact, 81% of Americans believe that oil spills are a very serious problem.*” The report goes on “*chronic oil dumping in the ocean most clearly communicates that the oceans are in trouble, and makes people very angry. People see the fact that 3.25 million tons of oil enters the world's oceans each year as a strong indicator that the oceans are in trouble (71% ‘great deal of trouble’). This statement also makes a plurality (40%) feel very angry.*” In spite of a string of high profile environmental tragedies that their industry was accountable for going back to the Santa Barbara oil spill in 1969, this must have been really bitter medicine for the “Big Oil” people to swallow. The writing was on the wall. Big Oil was in for a rough time.

Since the completion of the SeaWeb/Mellman poll just over a decade ago, the public's perception of the existence and causes of an ocean crisis has been shifted away from oil and towards commercial fishing. Much of this shift can be attributed to the efforts and expenditures of the Pew Trusts, to the ENGOs and academic institutions that they support with tens of millions of dollars each year and to their ability to manipulate the news media.

Thanks to the successful demonization of commercial fishermen, Big Oil appears to be off the hook. In fact, to contend with the recent run-up in energy prices, the U.S. is in the process of dismantling a long standing ban on offshore drilling.

The Pew Trusts

They aren't the average charitable foundation, having been taken far beyond the traditional role of grant giving. In “Charity Is New Force in Environmental Fight” in the NY Times (06/28/01), Douglas Jehl wrote “*a \$4.8 billion foundation called the Pew Charitable Trusts has quietly become not only the largest grant maker to environmental causes, but also one that controls much more than the purse strings. Unlike many philanthropies that give to conservationist groups, Pew has been anything but hands-off,*

*...serving as the behind-the-scenes architect of highly visible recent campaigns....*” Pew has moved beyond the role of facilitation to developing and advocating specific positions, a vast departure from business as usual in the foundation world. In the wrap up of his article, Mr. Jehl quotes Rebecca Rimel, president of the Pew Trusts, on Pew’s effect on the national debate on global warming, *“let’s wait and see what the outcome is, let’s see who has been able to win the hearts and minds of the public.”* She could have just as easily been speaking about fishing.

SeaWeb was only the start. Since its creation, Pew has been a major funder of “marine conservation” programs of anti-fishing ENGOs – almost \$5 million to Environmental Defense, \$3 million to Natural Resources Defense Council, \$3 million for the Marine Fish Conservation Network, \$4 million for Audubon, etc. Pew has also invested heavily in two organizations that it created; \$34 million for Oceana and \$40 million for the National Environmental Trust, both of which have been in the forefront of the anti-fishing crusade.

What’s wrong with funding fisheries research? That depends – primarily on the kind of research being funded. If it’s to learn more about fish or the environment they live in, it’s fine. We don’t know enough about any species for really effective management, and with generally meager government research budgets it will be a long time before we do. How about gear research? Anything that allows fishermen to fish more cleanly or, in these days of skyrocketing energy costs, more efficiently is going to be good for the fishing industry and good for the fish.

That’s not what Pew buys. I’ve never seen reports of Pew-funded population, gear or habitat research that involves scientists out there on the water. Pew “research” involves sifting existing – and undoubtedly inadequate – data to “prove” that fishing practices, management regimes, just about anything to do with commercial fishing, is leading to the destruction of the oceans. Calling it agenda driven research seems a pretty good fit, and, as Ms. Rimel’s comments demonstrate, it’s not just the research that’s agenda driven.

This was conveniently illustrated in a letter to the Telegraph on September 16 referencing an article about comedian Ted Danson’s concern with spiny dogfish. Juliana Stein, Pew/Oceana’s communications manager, wrote *“overfishing is the most severe threat facing our oceans, and if governments don’t properly manage fisheries -- including shark fisheries -- using science-based measures, many fish populations could end up beyond the point of return.”* Not climate change, not massive oil spills, not unbridled offshore energy development and not the continuing and growing outwash of a world population approaching 7 billion that is increasingly dependent on noxious household chemicals and pharmaceuticals that end up in our estuaries and oceans; according to Pew/Oceana, it’s all about those rapacious fishermen, and the Pew/Oceana/SeaWeb PR machine reinforces this whenever possible. I’ll bet dollars to donuts that Pew won’t kick any of its billions of Big Oil bucks into actually going out and counting, weighing or measuring sharks.

But Pew’s severely distorted view of what’s going on in the oceans isn’t restricted to letters to editors, press releases and other trivial-seeming yet cumulatively damaging communications by salaried flacks. It goes far beyond that.

A few years back Pew spent \$5.5 million on The Pew Oceans Commission. Led by a former Congressman who had served as Bill Clinton’s Chief of Staff, it was supposed to present an objective evaluation of who’s doing what to the oceans and how to fix it. From its website, it is *“conducting the first review of policies and laws needed to sustain and restore living marine resources in over 30 years. The Commission includes leaders from the worlds of science, fishing, conservation, business, and politics.”*

In the “follow the money” tradition established by Woodward and Bernstein in Watergate days, I did some digging into the relationships between Pew and the various commission members (discussed in greater detail in “The Pew Commission – a basis for national ocean policy?” at <http://www.fishingnj.org/netusa23.htm>).

*“The Pew Ocean Commission includes the president of the Natural Resources Defense Council; the president of the Center for Marine Conservation (now the Ocean Conservancy); a trustee of the Rockefeller Brothers Fund (which has provided grants to the Conservation Law Foundation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Marine Conservation, the American Oceans Campaign, and Audubon – each of which has contributed significantly to making life miserable and earning a living increasingly difficult and often impossible for large numbers of working fishermen); a trustee of the Packard Foundation (which has also provided grants to the Conservation Law Foundation, the Natural Resources Defense Council, the Center for Marine Conservation, the American Oceans Campaign and Audubon as well as Environmental Defense - ditto - and SeaWeb – ditto again); the past president of the American Sportfishing Association (which is a member, along with most of the NGOs listed above, of the Pew-funded Fish Conservation Network); the president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change; a Pew Fellow; and two commercial fishermen, one of whom is the president of a trade association that has been funded by Packard and the other was a trustee of a trade association whose formation was supported by and with other ties to Pew.”*

(Were we talking matrimonial rather than funding relationships, that much incest would likely have brought about the hemophilia-driven expiration of the Commission long before that \$5.5 million was spent.)

I then did a simple analysis of the references that were used to support the conclusions of the Commission's report "*Ecological Effects of Fishing in Marine Ecosystems of the United States.*" Two of the three authors of the report were Pew Marine Conservation scholars, well more than a third of the 179 references the report cited had at least one author who was financially connected to Pew, as did almost half of the cited references published since 1995 (it was then that Pew became actively involved in convincing the public that commercial fishing, not Big Oil, was ruining the world's oceans). This isn't scholarly research, it's a deck of cards stacked to support a particular player. Yet it's designed to inform national policy makers on what ocean governance should be. And there's no reason to think that this campaign isn't going international, particularly considering Oceana is also in business in South America and Europe. Who's next?

The proof is in the pudding –

A Google search on "Exxon Valdez oil spill" will return 287,000 hits. The Exxon Valdez went on the rocks back when the internet was a tool for computer geeks and academics. A search on "Prestige oil spill" returns only 56,900 hits. The Prestige broke up in 2002, when the internet was a regular part of hundreds of millions of peoples' lives, and spilled twice as much oil as the Exxon Valdez. Damages and clean-up costs were roughly equivalent. A Google search on "overfishing" returns 933,000 hits.