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Striking a Balance: Improving Stewardship of Marine Areas

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BOOK REVIEWS

Striking a Balance: Improving Stewardship of Marine Areas*National Research Council*

Washington, DC: National Academy Press, 1997. 177 pp.

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The result of a 1993 National Marine Board forum, *Striking a Balance* is a research report which documents the findings of three in-depth case studies conducted in the US, under the auspices of the National Research Council. The 15-member committee (whose biographical sketches are provided in an appendix), which developed and directed the project, notes that the study originated in the recognition of current potentially harmful trends in the coastal areas of the U.S.—notably, increased pressure from development and population growth—and the need for more comprehensive and effective management of marine areas (which in this report does not include the terrestrial portion of coastlines). The study areas, chosen to represent the diversity of contemporary coastal issues in the U.S., include the Florida Keys (a marine sanctuary experiencing pressure from recreational users), the Gulf of Maine (where commercial fishing threatens fish stocks), and Southern California (experiencing a controversy over development of offshore oil and gas reserves).

Although the book might be readable for the general public, the intended audience, according to the authors, are actors and institutions involved, in some form, in coastal management. Consequently, the book is applied in focus and directed towards assessing existing marine management and relevant government structures and processes. The result is a distillation of lessons learned, along with subsequent recommendations for policy.

While the first chapter provides a general

overview of the challenges involved in managing marine areas, chapter two outlines current trends and management regimes in the United States. Chapter three describes the three case studies and a summary of themes for each. Each of the three areas are assessed for 1) effect of government regulations; 2) ecological and biological issues; 3) potential for commercial or recreational uses; and 4) social, cultural and economic context. The following three chapters deal with theoretical issues of governance, ways to improve existing management schemes, and potential tools for achieving more effective marine resource management.

Recognizing both the difficulties involved in managing large, unbounded systems, and the complexity of the multi-level institutional structure governing marine areas, the majority of recommendations are directed towards improving inter-agency cooperation and streamlining policy and procedure. Specifically, four basic goals are outlined: 1) create a National Marine Council to “facilitate interagency problem solving” (p. 5); 2) create regional marine councils in particularly problematic areas to work at the operational level; 3) enhance the ability of individual federal programs to more effectively achieve goals; and 4) adopt management tools to increase efficiency of regional councils and agencies.

The book’s political emphasis provides a refreshing angle from which to observe and assess marine area management. However, other social factors are glossed over in its wake, most notably those of a non-economic stature (not a surprising outcome, since only two of the 15 committee members are social scientists, both of whom are economists). Harboring much of the ‘sustainable development’ philosophy borne out of the 1992 Earth Summit, the committee has developed “recommendations for improving the governance and management of marine areas both for environmental stewardship and for the development of ocean resources” (p. ix).

Although the case study approach in *Striking*

the Balance is informative, the concluding recommendations are not likely to prove a revelation to maritime-oriented social scientists, particularly those familiar with the coastal scene in the U.S. (see for example, Beatley et al. 1994; Sorensen 1997). For complimentary reading in this regard the reader is referred to other case studies which deal more specifically, and in more depth, with the mechanics of community coastal management (Gilman 1997; Warner 1997) and systems approaches to marine management (Johnson and Orbach 1997).

The national level perspective taken in this

work identifies important issues and problems in U.S. coastal areas. However, transforming discourse into specified, numbers oriented policies, and which also considers non-pecuniary social phenomena, will require going beyond the general recommendations outlined in the report. Exactly how one goes about creating the institutional integration proposed by the authors still, for the most part, remains a process of trial and error and would benefit from more research of an ethnographic nature.

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