
Queen Angelfish (Photo by Joyce and Frank Burek, NOAA Photo Library)

President Obama today proclaimed June 2009 to be National Oceans Month, a time to “celebrate these vast spaces and the myriad ways they sustain life.” The proclamation calls on “all Americans to learn more about the oceans and what can be done to conserve them.”

Beyond that symbolic move, Obama took an important step toward a unified national ocean policy. He issued a memorandum creating an Ocean Policy Task Force led by the Council on Environmental Quality, and directing the Task Force to develop within 90 days recommendations for:

> A national policy that ensures the protection, maintenance, and restoration of the health of ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes ecosystems and resources, enhances the sustainability of ocean and coastal economies, preserves our maritime heritage, provides for adaptive management to enhance our understanding of and capacity to respond to climate change, and is coordinated with our national security and foreign policy interests. The recommendations should prioritize upholding our stewardship responsibilities and ensuring accountability for all of our actions affecting ocean, coastal, and Great Lakes resources, and be consistent with international law, including customary international law as reflected in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea.

This memorandum should kick-start a national ocean policy discussion that has been stalled since shortly after the Bush administration issued its response to the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy’s (and implicitly the Pew Ocean Commission’s) recommendations nearly five years ago. And it clearly puts environmental protection in a favored position at the starting line of policy development.