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## [Can World Leaders Tame the Wild West of the High Seas?](#)



Posted by [Brian Clark Howard](#) of [National Geographic](#) in [Ocean Views](#) on February 26, 2014

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A panel speaks at the World Ocean Summit in Half Moon Bay, California, on February 26, 2014. (Photograph by Brian Clark Howard)

Earlier this month, [Indonesia announced the world's largest sanctuary for manta rays](#). At the [World Ocean Summit](#) Tuesday, Peter Seligmann, the CEO of Conservation International, said the sanctuary “was not done out of good will, it was done out of enlightened self interest.”

Seligmann said Indonesia had made careful calculations about how much manta rays were worth for ecotourism and for stabilizing marine ecosystems.

“Countries are talking about [such] marine protected areas so they can rebuild fish stocks,” Seligmann added, alluding to the fact that studies have shown that marine reserves have a “spill over” effect in boosting the number of fish in surrounding areas.

Sharif Sutardjo, the minister of marine affairs and fisheries for Indonesia, told the summit delegates assembled in Half Moon Bay, California, that seafood “is important to Indonesia for food and jobs.” He added that not only do many Indonesians rely on fish for protein, but that the country has an important export business that supports jobs.

“We need to protect that,” he said ([see more articles on the World Ocean Summit](#), which is hosted by The Economist and National Geographic).

### **Bottom Up or Top Down**

Jia Guide, the deputy director-general of the department of treaty and law for China’s Ministry of Foreign Affairs, said national ocean policies can come about through one of two main approaches: bottom up or top down.

A recent drop in the consumption of sharkfin soup in China can be attributed to both factors, said Guide.

Bottom-up pressure had built through the actions of advocacy organizations and activism by retired basketball star Yao Ming. Top-down signals had been set by the Chinese government, which recently banned the use of sharkfin soup in official functions.

Setting the table for an optimistic approach to ocean protection, Jeff Ardron, a senior fellow with the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies in Germany, said, “My vision is not a tragedy of the commons, it’s an inspiration of the commons.”

Ardron explained that innovation could lead to creative problem solving around the oceans.

Still, Christopher Connor, the CEO of shipping logistics company Wallenius Wilhelmsen, warned that inconsistent enforcement can undermine ocean protections. Although the U.S. has emissions standards for ships, only about one in 500 are actually tested, Connor noted. Of those tested, 50 percent fail.

With such weak enforcement, ship owners are not incentivized to invest in cleaner technologies, said Connor. “We want fair and open competition and we want everyone to play by the same rules,” he said of global shipping.

### **International Agencies: Stormy Waters?**

Joshua Reichert, the director of environmental initiatives for the Pew Charitable Trusts, told the summit that the structure of international ocean authorities “leaves a lot to be desired.” He gave as an example the fact that agencies like the United Nations, the International Whaling Commission, and the International Maritime Organization can often be held hostage by a few dissenting votes.

Reichert said the problem has been particularly acute on the high seas, where ships can often change their flags of origin or avoid reporting their activities. About 10 percent of the global fish catch is caught on the high seas, meaning part of the ocean that is not under any national jurisdiction, he added.

Jose Mana Figueres, a former president of Costa Rica and current co-chair of an independent nonprofit called the Global Ocean Commission, said a major problem with international ocean agencies is that they function like a patchwork, dividing the ocean like a quilt. But “fish don’t require passports to go from one place to another,” he said.

“It’s not the global oceans it’s the global ocean,” said Figueres. “There is no planet b, so we better get more serious about taking care of the one we have.”

David Miliband, also a co-chair of the Global Ocean Commission and the former UK Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, warned the summit delegates that they should “be careful what you wish for.”

He explained that if there were a new international agency created to oversee all ocean affairs, as many advocates have called for, it could get hijacked by one difficult country.

When pressed during a question section, Figueres admitted that turning the entire high seas into a marine protected area, as he had suggested at the summit, would be a “bold move.” He said the current state of ocean degradation calls for such bold thinking.

But he also said that first steps toward better ocean governance around the world would be requiring all fishing vessels to use tracking technology, so regulators could observe their movements; requiring traceability of seafood, so regulators could know where and how everything is caught; and stricter screening of seafood coming into ports, to deter illegal catches.

“Then we could start to get a handle on governance,” said Figueres.

**Don't miss our live Hangout with National Geographic Explorer-In-Residence Enric Sala, marine biologist Tierney Thys, and submarine pilot and diesel engineer Erika Bergman on February 28 at 5:30 p.m. EST. Click here on Friday to watch: <http://bit.ly/1j4hPqB> #LetsExplore**

*[Brian Clark Howard](#) covers the environment for National Geographic. He previously served as an editor for [TheDailyGreen.com](#) and [E/The Environmental Magazine](#), and has written for [Popular Science](#), [TheAtlantic.com](#), [FastCompany.com](#), [PopularMechanics.com](#), [Yahoo!](#), [MSN](#), and elsewhere. He is the co-author of six books, including [Geothermal HVAC](#), [Green Lighting](#), [Build Your Own Small Wind Power System](#), and [Rock Your Ugly Christmas Sweater](#).*

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