Non-Governmental Organization Roles in Shaping Future Ocean Governance and Management

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Introduction

The future of the ocean rests on the effectiveness of good governance, holistic management, and most importantly, urgent and sustained action to address complex marine issues. Conservation practitioners and resource managers struggle to keep pace with the growing threats to marine ecosystems, such as climate change, ocean acidification, overfishing, habitat loss, and marine plastics. In response to these ecological crises and insufficient management actions, the number and diversity (as well as total memberships and revenues) of environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOS) focused on ocean health has grown rapidly since the beginning of the environmental movement in the early 1960s. Arguably more active than ever before, ENGOS have expanded their participation in ocean governance processes in recent decades, alongside many other key rights-holders (i.e., Indigenous communities) and stakeholders (e.g., industry, coastal communities, various levels of government), and have adopted a greater breadth of roles and responsibilities. These roles may include influencing policy development and implementation, promoting community engagement and marine stewardship, and directly or indirectly contributing to scientific knowledge acquisition and dissemination. An important consideration is how ENGOS will respond to the

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1 B. Straughan and T. Pollak, The Broader Movement: Nonprofit Environmental and Conservation Organizations, 1989–2005 (Washington, DC: The Urban Institute, 2008), 1, https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/publication/32186/411797-The-Broader-Movement-Nonprofit-Environmental-and-Conservation-Organizations-.PDF.
2 Straughan and Pollak, id.; S.D. Fuller et al., “Informing and Improving Fisheries Management Outcomes: An Atlantic Canadian Large Pelagics Case Study by the Ecology Action Centre,” in Science, Information, and Policy Interface for Effective Coastal and Ocean Management, eds., B.H. MacDonald et al. (Boca Raton: CRC Press, 2016), 419–443, doi.org/10.1201/b21483-24.
3 R. Blasiak et al., “The Role of NGOs in Negotiating the Use of Biodiversity in Marine Areas Beyond National Jurisdiction,” Marine Policy 81 (2017), 1–8, doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.03.004; S. Oberthür et al., Participation of Non-Governmental Organisations in International Environmental Governance: Legal Basis and Practical Experience (Berlin: Ecoscript, 2013), 20, https://www.ecologic.eu/sites/files/publication/2013/ngo_participation_brief.pdf.
increasingly complex challenges in coastal and ocean environments and how to best achieve meaningful conservation throughout the science-policy-public interface. Throughout this essay, we will highlight some key ENGO roles, responsibilities, and achievements in shaping the future of ocean governance, by drawing on several examples and recent experiences in Canada. The discussion is not intended as a comprehensive list.

### Key Management Approaches

Increasingly complex marine conservation and management challenges have necessitated broader engagement from a range of stakeholders, disciplines, and experiences. ENGOs catalyze participation by convening a diversity of expertise and promoting the development of professional skill sets. Rather than adopting a single species or sectoral approach, as is often the case in fisheries, ENGOs have emphasized a more holistic and ecosystem-based management approach through marine spatial planning (MSP) and integrated coastal and ocean management (ICOM). Together, MSP and ICOM are intended to address the many competing uses and actors in the ocean sector, which requires engaging multiple disciplines to sustainably manage a marine ecosystem and its resources. Given the number and sheer complexity of marine issues today, these interdisciplinary approaches will continue to gain momentum and relevance in the future of ocean governance.

### Training Marine Managers

Some ENGOs support academic programs and research projects that are aligned with the principles of ICOM, MSP, and other holistic and interdisciplinary management approaches. In these cases, ENGOs may partner with institutions to help train and hire the next generation of marine managers. While the total number of employment opportunities remains minor relative to government and industry sectors, ENGOs continue to employ skilled

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4 Oberthür et al., id.; A. Chircop, “Teaching Integrated Coastal Management: Lessons from the Learning Arena,” *Ocean & Coastal Management* 43 (2000): 343–359.

5 M. Bailey et al., “Canada at a Crossroad: The Imperative for Realigning Ocean Policy with Ocean Science,” *Marine Policy* 63 (January 2016), 53–60, doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2015.10.002; S. Heileman (ed.), *A Handbook for Measuring the Progress and Outcomes of Integrated Coastal and Ocean Management*, IOC Manuals and Guides No. 46; ICOM Dossier No. 2 (Paris: UNESCO, 2006), http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0014/001473/147313e.pdf.

6 Heileman, id.
professionals from a wealth of disciplines. For example, the Canadian Revenue Agency lists revenues close to CA$1 billion in 2011 for 300 charitable organizations with significant environmental programs, including those with marine programs. In the same fiscal year (2011–2012), the top 32 Canadian ENGOs employed 1,486 full-time staff.

As a greater number of job opportunities in marine management have become available, especially in the field of ICOM, academic institutions have responded to this growing demand for skilled professionals by developing specialized training programs and courses. In addition, ENGOs often provide direct training opportunities in partnership with these academic programs through internships and job placements, in turn making students more employable, given their recent and relevant experiences and skills. For example, the Master of Marine Management program at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Canada, was established in response to an international call for interdisciplinary graduates, with an emphasis on enrolling students from developing nations. Between 2008 and 2015, 94 percent of graduates (88 of 94 graduates) were employed within their discipline, and 12.5 percent (11 of 88 graduates) were employed by ENGOs.

Policy Influence

ENGOs have pushed for increasing transparency, accountability, and inclusivity through local, national, and international governance delegations and by engaging media and the public. For example, the number of ENGOs that have successfully obtained observer or consultative status with the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) has increased by more than 500 percent over the last three decades. Nationally, there is no shortage of examples of ENGOs making significant marine conservation and policy contributions in national governance delegations.
Canada. From leading local stewardship initiatives (e.g., the Great Canadian Shoreline Cleanup), to informing local government policies that steer industry or institutional operations (e.g., influencing Montreal City Council to pass a ban on single-use plastic bags) and helping the federal government achieve national and international mandates (e.g., ‘pushing’ the Canadian government to commit to protecting 10 percent of its marine areas by 2020), ENgos are often on the front line of positive policy change in Canada and around the world.

**Science and Data Accessibility**

By fostering meaningful collaborations with various stakeholders and other organizations, ENgos can facilitate and strengthen important linkages across sectors and disciplines. They can act as the creators and compilers of science, policy, and economic knowledge, while being an objective source of information for governance and management decisions. ENgos also have a crucial responsibility to act as third-party watchdogs regarding information published by agencies, including those of the government, to ensure accuracy and transparency. Providing access to the most comprehensive and timely information, regardless of whether the ENGO is itself the producer or reviewer, is an essential component and role for bridging the science–policy–public interface. ENgos are proven to be skilled at accessing such information, as well as translating important (and often complex) scientific data and policies to make them accessible for general audiences. This in turn promotes better dialogue, compliance, and stewardship among decision-makers, resource users, media, and the public alike, while providing a fundamental step toward shared conservation objectives, actions, and trust.

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14 Blasiak et al., supra note 3 above; Winfield, supra note 12 above; E.M. De Santo et al., “Does Information Matter in iCOM? Critical Issues and the Path Forward,” in MacDonald et al. (eds.), supra note 2, 447–463.  
15 Heilman, supra note 5 above; De Santo, id.; S.S. Soomai, “The Science–Policy Interface in Fisheries Management: Insights about the Influence of Organizational Structure and Culture on Information Pathways,” *Marine Policy* 81 (2017): 53–63, doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.03.016.  
16 Soomai, id.  
17 De Santo, supra note 14 above; A. Agarwal, “Role of NGOs in the Protection of Environment,” *Journal of Environmental Research and Development* 2 (2008): 933–938.  
18 Agarwal, id.; S.S. Soomai, “Understanding the Science–Policy Interface: Case Studies on the Role of Information in Fisheries Management,” *Environmental Science & Policy* 72 (2017): 65–75, doi.org/10.1016/j.envsci.2017.03.004.
Public Outreach

Unsustainable human activity and resource use is the ultimate cause of the global environmental degradation we are now witnessing. How we communicate, manage and mitigate these activities will determine the future health of the ocean. Recent studies have pointed out that public awareness and perception of marine issues will govern the way individuals and the public will take action. It is therefore imperative that ENGOs due diligence includes engaging the public with marine issues so as to promote conservation-focused solutions.19

Many ENGOs have already invested in developing creative and compelling communication strategies to connect with people using digital and social media channels. These are an essential tool for ENGOs, as they allow information to be disseminated widely and cost-effectively, target specific or broad audiences, build a sense of community (even globally), and provide a forum to participate in and influence conservation actions and decisions that were traditionally left to government and industry.20

Recent statistics put the number of social media users worldwide at 2.46 billion people in 2017. This represents a 153 percent increase from 970 million users in 2010.21 Communications strategies driven by public demand, particularly through the use of digital and social media channels, will continue to drive ENGOs to tell a compelling, and often visual, story that resonates with engaged audiences and promotes public support for marine conservation and ocean governance.

Industry Development

ENGOs’ capacity to affect the development of sustainable industry products, standards, and practices has established an important and recent trend. By communicating science and encouraging the public to make more informed decisions, ENGOs have helped increase the demand for more sustainable products.

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19 H.K. Lotze et al., “Public Perceptions of Marine Threats and Protection from around the World,” Ocean and Coastal Management 152 (2018), 14–22, doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2017.11.004.
20 S. Dosemagen, “Can Social Media Help to Save the Environment?” Huffington Post, last updated 28 January 2017, https://www.huffingtonpost.com/shannon-dosemagen/-social-media-and-saving-t_b_9100362.html.
21 Statista, “Number of Social Media Users Worldwide from 2010 to 2021 (in billions),” Statista (2018), https://www.statista.com/statistics/278414/number-of-worldwide-social-network-users/.
products. This provides new market niches in which industry has already begun to respond by developing and supplying environmentally responsible products. For example, ENGOS have been a significant driver of sustainable seafood campaigns (e.g., the Ocean Wise Seafood Program) that encourage industry, retailers, and consumers to purchase products that have minimized the risk of overfishing and habitat degradation, among other conservation concerns.

Compelling, fact-based messaging that discourages harmful fishing methods have led to a diversity of ENGO-based seafood eco-labelling programs. These in turn provide management transparency and promote fishery sustainability. While the effectiveness of eco-labels and the merits of their standards may be controversial for some fisheries, the fact remains that ENGOS have helped improve awareness and empowered the public to make informed choices and actions that have resulted in an industry shift towards sustainable fisheries management and marine conservation considerations.

Parting Thoughts

Scientists agree that the marine environment is deteriorating at a greater rate than ever before. Fortunately there is now an unprecedented level of local to international attention and resources focused on the health of the ocean and its sustainable use. Among the myriad of stakeholders and users involved, there are significant increases in both the number and scope of ENGOS that play a principal role throughout the science-policy-public interface, and increasingly, this interface is inclusive of industry as well.

By helping develop and influence good management practices, creating and disseminating scientific knowledge, and connecting with the public to help make more informed and sustainable choices, ENGOS will remain not only relevant in the future but will continue to shape the next steps in ocean governance and management. Good marine governance will undoubtedly require all hands on deck for the benefit of a healthy ocean for our common future.

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22 S.J. Gilbert, “The Value of Environmental Activists,” Harvard Business School Working Knowledge, 8 September 2008, https://hbswk.hbs.edu/item/the-value-of-environmental-activists.