

Chronological: International Marine Debris Conference, Hawaii, 2000-08-07

Senator Daniel K. Inouye Papers

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Dan Inouye

U.S. SENATOR FROM HAWAII



**“SOCIETY’S ROLE AND OBLIGATIONS AS STEWARDS
OF THE OCEAN ENVIRONMENT”**

STATEMENT BY SENATOR DANIEL K. INOUE

**INTERNATIONAL MARINE DEBRIS CONFERENCE ON
DERELICT FISHING GEAR AND THE OCEAN ENVIRONMENT**

**AUGUST 7, 2000
HAWAII CONVENTION CENTER**

When this conference was first brought to my attention, I must confess that it took a few moments to register – “marine debris.” That is a sophisticated way of saying rubbish in the ocean. Harmful rubbish and the need for trash collection. Now that registers and will resonate in our communities.

The task is daunting, but the message is simple: We must all work together to clean up, and pick up after ourselves to stem the tide of debris and destruction at sea.

Two decades ago, we did not know much about marine debris. This global conference reflects how much we have learned since then about the scale and importance of this problem. For example, we now know that the debris comes from all types of sources around the world, including ships and fishing vessels. But, it has also become clear that close to 80 percent of the rubbish in our oceans is washed, blown or dumped from shore. This debris moves through the world’s oceans and into the most remote places, as well as onto our beaches.

While we have made some progress on reducing pollution from ships, a national or global solution to the marine debris problem is not yet within our grasp. Here in the Pacific alone we are faced with frightening statistics involving the entanglement and death of sea turtles, marine birds, whales, dolphins, fish, and seals, and the destruction of our precious coral reefs.

I am pleased to see representatives from across the Pacific, including Chile, Australia, Japan, Niue, Fiji and Micronesia, all coming together to develop a strategy to clean up our oceans and keep them clear of marine debris.

I am particularly pleased to learn about the efforts of the “Trash Busters,” high school students who are committed to tackling this issue, and protecting our unique marine resources for future generations to enjoy. I commend these students for their dedication to this important cause.

I need not remind you, though, that marine debris is only one of a myriad of issues affecting our nation’s coastal and ocean resources. We are faced with many challenges in the U.S. Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) and the global ocean on how best to fulfill our stewardship responsibilities. The key to effectively meeting these challenges is commitment—a commitment to do what is necessary. A commitment to make and then implement difficult decisions, domestically and internationally. The solution will not come from government action alone—each community, each person must also commit to making these tough decisions a part of everyday life.

Healthy oceans are critical to our quality of life. They provide food, medicine, recreation, and energy. We have heard the statistics:

- one out of every six jobs in the United States is marine related;**
- one of every two Americans live within 50 miles of the coast;**
- more than 180 million people visit the coast each year, generating 85 percent of all revenues from tourism in this country.**

Our oceans are a vital environmental, economic, and recreational resource, and must be treated as a national priority.

In the 1960's we took a first, and revolutionary step toward focusing federal attention on our ocean and coastal resources. At the time we faced increasing pressures on these resources, but lacked any federal controls on coastal population growth, marine degradation, or overfishing. In 1966, the Congress created the Stratton Commission, which laid the foundation for U.S. ocean and coastal laws, policy and programs that have guided our stewardship for three decades.

The world has changed significantly since the days of the Stratton Commission. Ocean and coastal issues are gaining in importance, but they have not received the attention and priority they deserve. The ocean management regimes developed over the last 30 years need to be reexamined and revamped if we are to keep up with the changing times.

It saddens me to say that critical ocean conservation and management programs have not been adequately funded. Oceans have been treated as low priority compared with the more glamorous, such as the space program. We have invested billions of dollars to explore outer space, but have starved our missions to explore and understand our ocean space.

Some have criticized the Stratton Commission, alleging that its recommendations led our nation down the path to overexploitation of marine resources. I disagree. But, rather than debating the wisdom of actions taken over 30 years ago, I believe it is a better use of our time and energy to focus on the next 30 years and beyond.

Regardless of one's perspective, one point is clear and unrefutable: the days of "doing business as usual" are over. It is time to put down our polarizing magnets and work together cooperatively, based on rational deliberation rather than emotional sound bites, to achieve our common goals.

As a nation, we must renew our commitment toward developing an integrated national ocean and coastal policy for the U.S. EEZ. I am pleased to report that we are on the cusp of a new era in ocean conservation and policy--the Congress recently passed the Oceans Act of 2000, which the President signed into law today. Under the Oceans Act, the President, in consultation with the Congress, will appoint an independent Ocean Policy Commission to develop a national action plan for the 21st century to explore, protect, and better utilize our oceans and coasts.

As we work to get our domestic priorities in order, let us not forget that the ocean knows no boundaries. Many of the issues concerning our ocean environment can only be truly resolved through international cooperation.

There are many examples where the U.S., in an effort to set the example for the global community, will impose restrictions on domestic entities to protect its marine resources. This may sound like a good first step, but if the foreign governments and private entities do not follow suit, the U.S. could end up imposing restrictions on its own citizens, while those of other countries continue to do "business as usual."

One of the most emotional issues pending before the Congress relates to the banning of shark finning in the Pacific. This is a prime example of where U.S. policy must be supplemented by strong action to encourage foreign countries to adopt similar restrictions. Our action alone will not protect shark populations.

The protection of sea turtles is another example where international cooperation is critical to protecting these endangered resources. In the Pacific, only Hawaii-based fishermen are subject to severe prohibitions and restrictions, based on longline interactions with sea turtles. But these turtle populations interact with fleets from all nations throughout the Pacific Ocean. Fair questions have been raised as to whether these restrictions will actually protect the turtle population when the lion's share of the catch in the area is by unrestricted foreign fishing vessels.

Today, in Hawaii, an unprecedented partnership -- the city, state and federal governments, private industry and non-governmental organizations, as well as international governments -- are joining forces to remove derelict fishing gear in the Pacific. I have high hopes that the strategies developed from this collaboration will be replicated elsewhere.

I am convinced that it will be partnerships across government and private lines, and across domestic and international lines which will make the difference in the end. Might does not make right.

I submit to you that our nations must make a strong commitment to provide leadership in their own EEZs, as well as in the global ocean. Let us step forward to fulfill our responsibilities as stewards of our ocean environment. The distress call has been sent out. The S.O.S. – Save Our Seas.

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