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Sail around Americas eyes state of seas

A Rockefeller, a Cousteau and ship's captain reflect on BP



David Thoreson / Aroundtheamericas.org

A 25,000-mile circumnavigation of the Americas found beauty as well as eyesores — like this scene along the West coast of Mexico.

Sail around Americas gauges ocean health

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What a difference a year makes — that's how long it has taken a crew of scientists and conservationists to sail and motor the 25,000 miles around both North and South America.

The biggest change since they left: the BP oil spill.

Now making their way up the West Coast, the Ocean Watch crew have been observing ocean health — or lack thereof — since setting off from Seattle, Washington, on May 31, 2009.

[The Around the Americas expedition](#) isn't your Greenpeace-style exploit, either. No activists unfurling banners, just real scientists collecting jellyfish, taking water temperatures and testing pH levels of the seas — the latter a key concern as increasing carbon dioxide emissions make for more acidic oceans.

Moreover, the expedition is the brainchild of philanthropist David Rockefeller, Jr., and ocean navigator Mark Schrader; it has financial support from Unilever and the Tiffany & Co. Foundation; the endorsement of Fabien Cousteau, grandson of the legendary Jacques Cousteau; and logistical help from Seattle's Pacific Science Center.

To mark World Oceans Day on June 8, msnbc.com asked Rockefeller, Cousteau and Schrader, the Ocean Watch's captain, to weigh in on BP and the bigger oceans picture. Below are their responses.

Q: In light of the BP spill, what's your take on balancing the health of the oceans and the resources they provide — not just food but also energy. Is it possible to have both, i.e. healthy seas and sustainable drilling/fishing?

Rockefeller: I think that BP CEO Tony Hayward revealed the flaw in public perception of the oceans when he asserted the spill would not cause big problems because the Gulf "is a very big ocean." Big, yes, but not too big to be vulnerable to human impacts such as the enormous BP oil spill.

Clearly, we need to recalibrate the equation between protecting the health of our oceans and supplying our energy needs, and we cannot risk the widespread ruination of fisheries, spawning grounds, birdlife and tourism simply to satisfy the desire of oil companies to drill wherever they choose.

Cousteau: We've been using our ocean planet as both an infinite resource and garbage can. We're now seeing the fragility of the ocean world and the severe impact our carelessness has had on our one and only life support system. Despite the current challenges, going forward we can and must strike a delicate balance with the oceans if we are to survive.

... We must see our natural world as a bank account and start living on the interest instead of eating away the capital. We can achieve this by ending our wasteful practices, weaning ourselves off our 100-year-addiction to fossil fuels and embracing sustainable alternative sources of energy. Regarding fishing, we have lost almost 60 percent of the world's total fish stocks through wasteful fishing practices and overfishing. It is time we take pressure off the oceans by shifting from being "hunter-gatherers" to farmers of sea life in closed-system, land-based, low-impact aquaculture.

Schrader: Yes, I still believe it is possible to have both, but oil companies and other vested corporations should never be trusted to make decisions or to influence oversight or legislation which might impact their profits, particularly in regard to environmental issues.

Until each and every company owning or operating offshore wells has a plan in place to stop this kind accident — on the platform or at it's source on the ocean floor — all new permits should immediately be suspended.

There are many ocean areas on this planet which are simply too valuable, remote or fragile to put at risk from oil/mineral exploration or drilling. These areas need to be protected. All of this will cost money, but by doing nothing we're putting no less than our entire ocean environment at risk, and by extension, all of us.

Now is the time to tax every gallon of gas/fuel a significant amount, and to use that revenue to make sure our oversight and regulatory mechanisms are working and to invest in alternative energy research.

If we are very careful, the ocean can be shared as long as all of the partners understand it is a fragile and finite resource.

Q: What were the most concerning indicators of poor ocean health seen by the Around the Americas expedition?

Schrader:

- Low pH readings in the Gulf of Alaska;
- Absence of multi-year ice in the Northwest Passage and very little annual pack ice resulting in major hunting and cultural changes for native populations;
- Depleted fish stocks in the North Atlantic;
- Plastic and other debris, everywhere;
- Unsustainable fish farming practices in Chile, combined with huge pollution plumes from these farms and from untreated sewage from coastal cities dumped into bays and fjords;
- Idle commercial fishing fleets, hundreds and hundreds of boats, from Argentina, to Chile, to Peru — idle because fish stocks have been severely depleted from poor management, pollution, temperature;
- Very high ocean temperature (magnified by El Nino), as high as 92 degrees Fahrenheit from the equator north to Baja.

Q: What were the most encouraging indicators of good ocean health?

Rockefeller: Scientists, fishermen, public officials and school children everywhere who expressed concern about the health of their oceans and were actively working to protect it.

Schrader: Scientists and hunters listening to each other, and acting together based on information provided by both — in Barrow (Alaska) and in the western Arctic.

Fisheries management in and around the Falkland Islands, gathering the data, acting on it and enforcing compliance with sustainable regulation — their enforcement has teeth, break the law and your vessel gets impounded.

Scientists are beginning to speak out about important ocean health issues.

Children, when exposed to interesting things about the ocean, become advocates for it. Education is key to anything relating to ocean health — so in my view, marine science should be a required subject for study in all schools. It needs to be elevated from the typical one-chapter passing mention it gets in most schools.

People all around the Americas seem to be willing to talk about the issues and interested in what is actually happening to the ocean.

Q: If you were king of the world, not to mention oceans, what immediate steps would you take to improve the health of the oceans?

Rockefeller: Increasing public awareness is the necessary first step. Perhaps the Gulf oil spill will, sadly and belatedly, help that cause. Next, I would vastly improve the content of international agreements to protect fisheries, to lower the rate of ocean acidification, and to reduce the risk of pollution from industry and agriculture. On top of that, I would ensure that compliance measures were strong enough to support the agreements.

I would resist the temptation to become an Old Testament god and visit war, plague and pestilence upon the people, but some family planning would be helpful!

Cousteau: I would sharpen my Trident!! In complete candor, I would empower a global "army" of young people to engage in educational and restoration activities in order to nurse our planet back to health. Working with local communities in the U.S. and around the world, my vision through [Plant A Fish](#) is just that.

Schrader: Marine science would be a required subject, all schools, all grades, just like math and science.

Population control has to be addressed. We're too many on a small planet.

Discharge and overboard dumping of plastics and toxic debris would be stopped, plastic water bottles and plastic bags would disappear.

Fossil fuel use would be taxed, heavily (leading to better conservation and research for alternative energy).

Regulatory agencies (fisheries, exploration/drilling, preservation, etc.) would agree that their most important mission is to protect the oceans — all else comes a far second.

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