

Remarks Announcing the Coral Reef and Marine Protected Areas Initiatives at Assateague Island, Maryland

May 26, 2000

Thank you very much. Well, first, I want to thank all of our previous speakers. As so often happens when I get up to speak, what needs to be said has already been said.

Thank you, Carolyn Cummins, for your kind words and for your years and years of leadership for Assateague Island and for these beaches. I want to thank the park superintendent, Marc Koenigs. This is his last week here, because he has just gotten a new assignment at the Gateway National Recreation Area in New York Harbor, a place I've gotten a little more interested in, in the last few months. [Laughter] So he's got a very good assignment, and I wish him well.

I want to thank Sylvia Earle, the explorer-in-residence at National Geographic and, in a way, an explorer-in-residence for the American citizens, as you just heard. I want to thank also the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administrator, Jim Baker, and Deputy Secretary of the Interior David Hayes, who are here.

And I'd also like to recognize the elected officials, particularly the Maryland delegation from the United States Congress, who have been just terrific on these environmental issues: Senator Barbara Mikulski, thank you, Senator. She came dressed to spend the day here. I hope she does. [Laughter] I want to thank Senator Paul Sarbanes for being here. When I came up, he said, "You know, this is my part of Maryland. And my mother is here, and she is celebrating her 92d birthday today." So welcome to Mrs. Sarbanes. We're glad to see you; thank you. Give her a hand. That's great. [Applause] She's also got the coolest sunglasses of anybody here, I might add. [Laughter]

I'd like to thank Representatives Wayne Gilchrest, to my left, and Ben Cardin to my right for being here. And I'd like to recognize a guest from all the way across the country, Representative Sam Farr from northern California. He represents the district where Monterey Bay is, where we had our oceans conference 2 years ago, and he's a great friend of the environment. Thank you, Sam Farr, for being here.

I'd also like to thank the mayors, the council members, the State legislators who met me here. And I'd like to recognize Carl Zimmerman, the chief of research management of the Assateague National Island Seashore, for your work. Thank you all for being here.

Well, I came down here today to get ahead of the Memorial Day rush. [Laughter] And I didn't want all of you who wanted to sit here to be lost in the stampede of fun-seekers. But I thank you for coming. We all know that this weekend marks the opening of the summer beach season, and by the millions, Americans will flock to our coastlines. Beachlines and coastlines are now our number one tourist destination.

Our oceans, however, are far more than a playground. They have a central effect on the weather, on our climate system. Through fishing, tourism, and other industries, ocean resources—listen to this—support one out of every six jobs in the United States of America. Coral reefs and coastal waters are a storehouse of biodiversity. Think about what children here—and we have some children here from Bennett Middle School I met on the way down. And just think about what they see and learn about the timeless movement of the dunes, about the complex life of a coastal marsh—horseshoe crabs, living fossils whose blood provides us a vital antibacterial agent. And I learned today that 5,000 years ago, this island was several miles out in the ocean, brought back closer to shore by the rising of the sea level, something which is okay in small doses but could be very troubling for us if we don't deal with the problem of climate change, global warming, the melting of the icecaps, and the alarming level at which ocean levels could rise.

Even though they cover—yes, you can clap for that. [Applause] You have to forgive me. When I give these kinds of talks, I veer off the script a little bit. Oceans cover more than 70 percent of the Earth's surface. They are immensely powerful, as anybody who has ever been caught in an undertow can tell you. But they are also very, very fragile. Poisonous runoff from the Mississippi River alone has created

a dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico that is as large as the State of New Jersey. Here in Maryland, runoff threatens fish and crabs in the Chesapeake Bay.

Globally, already, people have destroyed 10 percent of the world's coral reefs. Another 20 percent are in grave peril. I saw the changes when I went snorkeling 5 years ago off the Great Barrier Reefs in Australia. And I read just last week of the challenges now presented to the second largest barrier reefs in the world, off the coast of Belize. Global warming, as I said, is helping to raise the ocean temperatures to record highs, changing weather patterns, killing coral reefs, driving species from their habitat.

When I was with Sam Farr 2 years ago in Monterey Bay, I went out into the bay with some young researchers from the Stanford center that's there. And they pointed out some small ocean organisms that just 50 years ago were 20 miles to the south—minuscule organisms that moved that far in 50 years.

Over the last 7 years, we've tried to change as much of this as we could, protecting millions of acres of forests and open space, showing we can clean up our environment and grow the economy at the same time. But we need to do more with our seas and our coasts. The old idea that we can only grow by putting more pollution into our lakes and rivers and oceans must finally be put to rest. Indeed, it is now clear that we can grow our economy faster over the long run by improving our environment, and it's really not enough for us just to try to keep it as it is. We have to do better.

I want to say, on behalf of Vice President Gore, as well as myself, that we are grateful for the opportunities we've had to do this work, grateful for the chance that we had to host the Oceans Conference in Monterey in 1998—and Hillary and Tipper were there, too. We had a wonderful day. Last year, the Vice President issued our one-year update, and we're going to try to put out a report every year. I hope that in successive years Presidents will do the same.

As has been said, we have quadrupled funding for national marine sanctuaries. We have new funding to rebuild our threatened fisheries. We extended a moratorium on offshore oil leases for oil and gas drilling through 2012. We've been an international leader in efforts to protect

whales and other endangered species. But we have to do more.

Today I want to announce two important initiatives that I believe will help to ensure that our oceans are places of delight and learning for generations to come. First, I am signing an Executive order to create a national system to preserve our coasts, reefs, underwater forests, and other treasures, directing the Commerce and Interior Departments to work together to create a network of marine protected areas, encompassing pristine beaches, mysterious deep-water trenches, and every kind of marine habitat. This Executive order directs NOAA to develop a single framework to manage our national network wisely. We intend to establish ecological reserves in the most fragile areas to keep them off-limits to fishing, drilling, and other damaging uses. I'm also directing the EPA to strengthen water quality standards all along our coasts and provide stronger protections for the most vulnerable ocean waters, to reduce pollution of beaches, coasts, and oceans.

Second, I'm announcing today our commitment to permanently protect coral reefs of the northwest Hawaiian Islands. If you've ever been there, you know why we should. These eight islands are not, all of them, so well-known, but they stretch over 1,200 miles. They shelter more than 60 percent of America's coral reefs. They're home to plants and animals found nowhere else on Earth and to highly endangered species, including leatherback turtles and monk seals.

I'm directing the Departments of Interior and Commerce to develop in the next 90 days a comprehensive plan to protect the reefs, working with State and regional authorities and making sure the people of Hawaii also have a voice at the table. It is in our national interest to do this, and it should not be a partisan issue. On more than one occasion, Representative Gilchrest has supported our environmental initiatives, and I thank you, sir, for that. It should not be a Republican or a Democratic issue.

I sent a budget this year to the Congress to provide significant new resources to fight climate change and air and water pollution. My lands legacy initiative would provide record funding to protect our lands and coasts. I think the leadership in Congress is swimming against the tide, because they've proposed a budget that would cut funding for critical environmental priorities. A House committee has slashed lands

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legacy by 75 percent. And once again, the majority is loading up the budget bills with anti-environmental riders that would cripple the new national monuments I created earlier this year, surrender our public lands to private interests, and undermine our efforts to protect water resources and combat global warming.

Already in this year of rather hot election rhetoric—you may have noticed there’s an election this year—[laughter]—there have been commitments to roll back the efforts I have taken to create 43 million roadless acres in our national forests. We need to have a clear, national, bipartisan consensus at the grassroots level that we don’t need these riders and we do need a national commitment to the environment.

For thousands of years, oceans and beaches have stirred the human imagination. Today, ocean depths offer hopes for medicine and science. They still stir the curious child in all of us. I said in my State of the Union Address that I thought in the next few years we would not only decode the human genome and find cures for various kinds of cancer, Parkinson’s, Alzheimer’s, diabetes, we would also find out

what’s in the black holes in the universe. But we are also going to find out what’s in the darkest depths of our oceans, and what we find out may save hundreds of thousands of people.

Forty-five years ago Rachel Carson wrote from her Maryland home that the sea “keeps alive the sense of continuing creation and of the relentless drive of life . . . in the sea nothing lives to itself . . . the present is linked with past and future, and each living thing with all that surrounds it.” If we could all think that about each other and our community—that we do not live to ourselves, that we are linked to the past and the future, and that everything that happens requires a due consideration for all that surrounds it—then America would have its greatest days in the new millennium.

Thank you very much, and God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 2:07 p.m. on North Ocean Beach. In his remarks, he referred to Carolyn Cummins, president, Maryland Coastal Bays Program; Marc Koenings, superintendent, Assateague National Island Seashore; and Senator Sarbanes’ mother, Matina. The Executive order is listed in Appendix D at the end of this volume.

Memorandum on Protection of United States Coral Reefs in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands

May 26, 2000

Memorandum for the Secretary of Interior, the Secretary of Commerce

Subject: Protection of U.S. Coral Reefs in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands

The world’s coral reefs—our tropical rain forests of the water—are in serious decline. These important and sensitive areas of biodiversity warrant special protection. While the United States has only 3 percent of the world’s coral reefs, nearly 70 percent of U.S. coral reefs are in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands. Many of the Northwest Hawaiian Island’s coral, fish, and invertebrate species are unique, and the area is home to endangered Hawaiian monk seals and threatened turtles. In 1909, President Theodore Roosevelt set aside certain islands and reefs in the Northwest Hawaiian Islands for the protection of sea birds. Today, the U.S. Fish and Wild-

life Service manages this area as the Hawaiian Islands National Wildlife Refuge.

In June 1998, I signed an Executive Order for Coral Reef Protection (E.O. 13089), which established the Coral Reef Task Force and directed all Federal agencies with coral reef-related responsibilities to develop a strategy for coral reef protection. States and territories with coral reefs were invited to be full partners with the Federal Government in preparing an action plan to better protect and preserve the Nation’s coral reef ecosystems. In March of this year, the Task Force issued the *National Action Plan to Conserve Coral Reefs*. The Plan lays out a science-based road map to healthy coral reefs for future generations, based on two fundamental strategies: promoting understanding of coral reef ecosystems by, for example, conducting comprehensive mapping, assessment,