



New Hope for the Oceans: Engaging Faith-Based Communities in Marine Conservation

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Science alone cannot protect the oceans and their biological diversity. Whereas, scientists can identify problems and empirical steps toward their resolution, support for research, problem solving, and implementation of solutions must come from societal sources. Among the most promising are religious communities whose members are motivated by their faith to collaborate with marine scientists in achieving shared goals. Many reasons prevail for engaging faith communities in mitigating assaults on the oceans and protecting them from threats to their functioning. Participants in the open forum convened by the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology during the 4th International Marine Conservation Congress shared their insights on (1) why and how marine researchers and conservation practitioners can best involve faith communities, (2) actions and attitudes that deter constructive engagement with faith communities, and (3) ways forward that the SCB should consider facilitating. Among ways forward identified are the Best Practices Project initiated recently by the RCBWG, adding cultural values and ethics as disciplines SCB members should probe when addressing conservation problems, regularly including cultural values and ethics in panels with other disciplines at international and regional SCB congresses, and appointing an associate editor of SCB publications who will assure the inclusion of articles in which religious and spiritual worldviews, values, and ethics are integrated with the conservation sciences.

Keywords: marine conservation, collaboration, faith communities, Best Practices Project, world religions, guidelines

OPEN ACCESS

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Specialty section:

This article was submitted to
Marine Conservation and
Sustainability,
a section of the journal
Frontiers in Marine Science

Received: 30 November 2016

Accepted: 17 February 2017

Published: 14 March 2017

Citation:

Schaefer J (2017) New Hope for the
Oceans: Engaging Faith-Based
Communities in Marine Conservation.
Front. Mar. Sci. 4:62.
doi: 10.3389/fmars.2017.00062

INTRODUCTION

Science alone cannot protect the oceans and their biological diversity. Nor can science alone mitigate threats to their flourishing. Whereas, scientists can identify problems and steps toward their resolution, support for research, problem solving, and implementation of solutions must come from societal sources. Among the most promising are spiritually motivated religious and indigenous communities that may be reliable collaborators with marine scientists in achieving shared conservation goals (Expertsvar, 2013; Schaefer, 2016).

Leaders of major world religions have expressed concern about the loss of biological diversity (e.g., Bartholomew, 2012; Francis, 2015; Waskow, 2015; Dalai Lama, 2016). They represent billions of adherents. In statements issued and campaigns initiated, they have drawn upon their traditions and ethical systems to identify behavior that the faithful should demonstrate toward other species and systems of Earth. Efforts by religious communities on the adverse effects of human-forced

climate change have been prominent recently (Schaefer, 2016), some have addressed the effects on oceans specifically (e.g., Francis, 2015; Bartholomew, 2016), and all have enormous potential for benefitting marine conservation locally to globally.

The potential of faith communities to facilitate the conservation of marine systems can be gleaned when analyzing past and ongoing examples of collaboration among scientific and faith communities and identifying actions that help and those that hinder successful interaction. These factors provide initial ideas for practices that marine conservationists can consider following when engaging religious and other spiritually-motivated communities for their support and advocacy.

To highlight some factors particular to marine researchers and practitioners when interacting with faith-based communities, the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group (RCBWG) of the Society for Conservation Biology (SCB) sponsored an open forum at the 4th International Marine Conservation Congress (IMCC). The forum began with brief overviews of challenges to marine conservation, possibilities for engaging faith communities in meeting these challenges, and efforts of the RCBWG to facilitate constructive interaction between conservation and faith communities. The majority of the forum's allotted time was dedicated subsequently to eliciting experiences of the participants when encountering and/or engaging faith communities in their projects and suggestions for future SCB attention to their collaboration in the future.

DAUNTING CHALLENGES AND POTENTIAL ALLIES

Challenges to marine conservation were described by several forum participants as “daunting.” Evidence for this conclusion include the growing human hunger for protein, manufactured energy, and minerals. Concurrently growing in the oceans are the number of diverse pollutants used in agriculture, plastics from domestic use, acidification caused by burning fossil fuels, and noise (Rhein and Rintoul, 2013; Center for Biological Diversity, 2016; Pacific Marine Environmental Laboratory, 2016; US Environmental Protection Administration, 2016). Scientific presentations at biennial gatherings of the International Congress for Conservation Biology (ICCB) since their inauguration in 2009 attest to threats to the flourishing of oceans and to conserving the diversity of their biota.

Forum participants insisted that societies can no longer think that the oceans are capable of absorbing pollutants. Some people may dismiss the vast oceans as a subject of concern except for the beaches they use and a few marine animals that attract their attention, and some may lack concern because they do not live near the oceans. However, as scientific discoveries continue to disclose the harm that is occurring below as well as above the surface of the water, the implications of oceanic degradation have significance for humans physically as well as spiritually—*physically* because harm to the oceans affect human life and well-being in some way now or into the future and *spiritually* as

humans strive to find meaning and purpose in life when relating to other humans, species, and systems of Earth.

Religiously motivated communities are potentially powerful allies for ocean conservationists. Many are already organized at local and regional levels, and some function nationally and internationally. Some are disciplined at least to some extent according to their organizational structures. Some know how to build alliances and coalitions. Some are effective when acting politically. Most importantly, religious communities may be the most significant groups in the world that point to the overarching moral obligations for members to care about and for other species, ecological systems, and the massive oceans of Earth and why they should care.

FACILITATING THE COLLABORATION OF MARINE CONSERVATION AND FAITH COMMUNITIES

The New Hope for the Oceans forum convened at the 4th IMCC was one effort by the RCBWG to identify and advance positive approaches that marine conservationists can take when relating to faith communities on projects. Established in 2007, the RCBWG has sought to strengthen interactions of biological conservation and religious communities throughout the world and to promote within the SCB an awareness of the importance of their collaboration (Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group, 2016). This commitment has prompted research and action to discourage religious communities from using ivory that has been brutally removed from the endangered African elephant and to encourage Buddhist communities to adopt ecologically compatible and compassionate ways of practicing the release of animals for merit (Awoyemi et al., 2016). To advance discussion within the SCB, the RCBWG sponsored symposia at ICCBs in 2013 and 2015 at which members shared projects in which they had involved religious leaders and communities, and a forum was held at the 2015 ICCB at which Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato si', On Care for Our Common Home* (Francis, 2015) and other religious sources for addressing conservation issues were discussed. Also emerging during these congresses was an increasing desire among some SCB members to engage religious leaders and communities because their approval and help was needed to initiate, complete, and/or advocate the implementation of conservation projects. Interest in sharing promising ways of interacting increased.

This growing interest among SCB members prompted the Board of the RCBWG to incorporate in its 2015 Strategic Plan the goal of identifying best practice guidelines for SCB members to consider when needing and/or wanting to engage religious leaders and communities in conservation projects (Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group, 2016). After months of planning, the 3-year Best Practices Project was approved in March 2016 and shared subsequently with the SCB's Board of Governors. The first step of this project was surveying the full membership of the SCB for their experiences when relating to faith-motivated communities. Conducted from 30 May to 10 September 2016 to accommodate publicizing

at the regional congresses, the Best Practices Survey yielded quantitative and qualitative data about positive ways in which conservationists have interacted with faith communities whose approval and/or assistance was needed for projects (Schaefer and Higgins, 2016). These data will serve as the basis for beginning to draft guidelines for engaging faith communities in conservation projects. Subsequent steps are mentioned in the summation below.

The New Hope for the Oceans forum at the IMCC provided an opportunity for marine conservationists to share ways in which they interacted with faith communities, identify positive approaches that make cooperation possible, and point to deterrents to cooperation that must be removed. The positive approaches and impediments to the collaboration of conservation and faith communities will be combined with the results of the aforementioned Best Practices Survey to serve as a pool of ideas for drafting Best Practice Guidelines at the workshop proposed by the RCBWG to be held during the 2017 ICCB in Cartagena, Colombia.

MARINE CONSERVATIONISTS' EXPERIENCES WITH FAITH COMMUNITIES

Participants in the forum shared their positive experiences when working with faith-motivated communities. They also shared challenges to establishing cooperative relationships with them.

Positive Experiences Working with Faith Communities

The availability of conservation teachings by religious and spiritual leaders provide an entry to encountering members of faith communities in areas slated for research and the practice of conservation. Forum participants expressed their appreciation for faith-based statements aimed at raising awareness of the ongoing threats to the oceans and the need to address these threats from faith perspectives. Prominent among religious leaders who have issued pertinent statements are Patriarch Bartholomew of Eastern Christian Orthodoxy and Pope Francis of Roman Catholic Christianity. Both have underscored the moral responsibility of their followers to protect and conserve the oceans. As the leader of ~300 million Orthodox Christians, Patriarch Bartholomew has annually called attention to World Oceans Day celebrated on June 8 (e.g., Bartholomew, 2016) and reminded the faithful of their responsibility to preserve and conserve the oceans. He has also led interfaith and interdisciplinary study trips to seas throughout the world to raise awareness of the problems plaguing them and to urge collaboration of scientists, religious leaders, theologians, ethicists, economists, and politicians in addressing them. Pope Francis, the leader of approximately 1.2 billion Catholics throughout the world, underscored in his epochal encyclical, *Laudato si' On Care for Our Common Home* (Francis, 2015) the intrinsic value of the oceans that must be conserved and the connectedness of all living and inanimate entities that constitute "Mother Earth." Both

leaders have characterized degrading species and systems of Earth as "sinful" (Bartholomew, 2012; Francis, 2015).

Statements and actions by these religious leaders have been helpful to marine researchers and conservationists when encountering adherents of those faiths in the locals in which the scientists are working or planning to work. Especially important in these encounters is the opportunity to discuss the value of oceans, seas, rivers, and the various plant and animal species that function within their ecological systems. Though discussion of faith-based values and ethics are not explicitly broached within empirical scientific research, forum participants emphasized the potential for gaining faith communities' support for marine conservation projects when including, striving to understand, and respecting their values and ethics.

Challenges When Interacting with Faith Communities

According to participants in the forum, marine conservationists face "many" challenges when encountering faith communities in their project areas. One that is particularly problematic is having to deal with more than one faith community and therefore, having to negotiate their diverse values that affect a project. One example shared by a forum participant was a conflict between Christian and traditional beliefs in Ghana pertaining to a project that required careful negotiation. When the conservationist focused on the shared space that needed conserving and led the members of the faith communities in identifying a resolution to the problem, they eventually agreed on an outcome that was mutually acceptable. Vital to this conversation was probing with them why they needed to work together, the multiple benefits of working together, and what each could bring from their varied perspectives (scientific and faith-based) to motivate reaching the project goal. Resolving the conflict required the researchers and members of the different faith community to be open to listening to one another in order to achieve a common goal to which all could contribute from their varied perspectives.

Marine conservationists face other challenges when encountering religious communities. According to forum participants, some of the deterrents to constructive interaction are "self-inflicted." Some conservationists devalue religions and consider them causes of strife and violence in the world. Some experience discomfort with using the term "religious" and "spiritual" for lack of experience with these dimensions of knowing and/or for failure to understand the basic meaning of these terms. Some scientific experts are reluctant to include religious faith perspectives due to unfamiliarity with them and their desire to work only within their fields of expertise. Some have assumptions about religions that deter them from wanting to interact with them. Some stereotype religions and communities due to biases. When discussing these and other self-inflicted restrictions, some conservationists encourage leaving their assumptions "at home," opening inclusively to faith communities in project areas where there are more than one, listening carefully to members of the communities, asking clarifying questions to facilitate understanding, building trust,

and acting politely and respectfully toward them as persons. The time required to cultivate trust may be immense but, nevertheless, worth spending—especially if approval and/or help from a faith community is necessary to proceed with a project.

FACILITATING EFFECTIVE MARINE SCIENCE-RELIGION COLLABORATION IN THE FUTURE

Much more must be accomplished by the SCB and its regional sections to encourage and facilitate members' positive engagement with faith communities. Though efforts are underway by the RCBWG to draft best practices guidelines for members to consider when encountering faith communities at project locations, other initiatives are essential to bridge conservation and faith communities. Most prominent among ideas that participants in the New Hope for the Oceans forum urged was the need to integrate religious and spiritual worldviews, values, and ethics within all SCB endeavors. Though the SCB subscribes to a “multi-disciplinary approach” to understanding human behavior that is threatening the “diversity of life on Earth” and has specified the disciplines of economics, anthropology, psychology, and history as ways of knowing that should be probed with the biological sciences (Society for Conservation Biology, 2016), religiosity, spirituality, and ethics must also be included as cultural realities that have significance for addressing ongoing threats to biological diversity and ocean flourishing.

According to forum participants, integrating faith-based worldviews, values, and ethics within the SCB can be initiated in three practical ways. One is to add cultural (faith-based) values and ethics as disciplines that must be considered with the biological sciences and other disciplines when researching and practicing conservation biology. A second way is to organize panels at international and regional congresses during which problems are addressed from all pertinent disciplinary perspectives, including cultural values and ethics, with the objective of yielding a more comprehensive understanding of and approaches to mitigating problems. A third way is by appointing an associate editor of SCB publications who is tasked with regularly including articles that integrate faith-based worldviews, values, and ethics with the biological sciences and other requisite disciplines. These three initiatives should be advocated before the SCB Board of Governors, officers of regional sections who are planning congresses, and editorial boards of SCB publications respectively, and they should be implemented expeditiously.

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SUMMATION

Because science alone cannot protect nor mitigate threats to the oceans and because faith-motivated communities can contribute significantly to conserving them in diverse ways, the SCB should be advancing positive interactions between conservation and faith communities. The RCBWG's Best Practices Project constitutes one promising approach. Future steps include (1) highlighting in a symposium proposed for the 2017 ICCB successful practices that SCB members shared in the Best Practices Survey, (2) convening a workshop following the symposium at which guidelines for establishing constructive relationships with religious leaders and communities will be drafted, (3) submitting the guidelines to the SCB Board of Governors for promulgation and promotion through SCB communication channels, (4) conducting forums on the guidelines at sectional SCB meetings in 2018, and (5) organizing a symposium at the 2019 ICCB during which successful collaborations of religions and conservation communities that result from following the guidelines will be explained and celebrated.

Based on the experiences and insights of participants in the New Hope for the Oceans forum at the 4th IMCC, other initiatives warranted by the SCB are (1) adding cultural values and ethics among the disciplines that should be probed when addressing conservation problems, (2) regularly including in international and regional congresses panel discussions that explore specific issues from the perspectives of pertinent disciplines including cultural values and ethics, and (3) appointing an associate editor of SCB publications who is tasked with assuring articles that integrate religious and spiritual worldviews, values, and ethics with conservation science. Implementing these actions expeditiously should result in more cogent and comprehensive approaches to mitigating and protecting the oceans.

AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

Theologian/ethicist JS (Marquette University) compiled, researched, expanded upon, provided supportive sources for, and wrote the proceedings of the “New Hope for the Oceans” forum organized by political scientist D. Johns (Portland State University) with assistance of J.-B. McCarthy (Fisheries and Oceans Canada), M. Lorbiecki (Interfaith Oceans), and JS. Sponsored by the Religion and Conservation Biology Working Group of the Society for Conservation Biology, this forum was held at the 4th IMCC in St. Johns, Newfoundland/Labrador on 31 July 2016.

Release__RCRC_FINAL_SCB_Letterhead.pdf; endorsed by the Global Policy Committee of the SCB <https://conbio.org/groups/working-groups/religion-and-conservation-biology>

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Conflict of Interest Statement: The author declares that the research was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

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