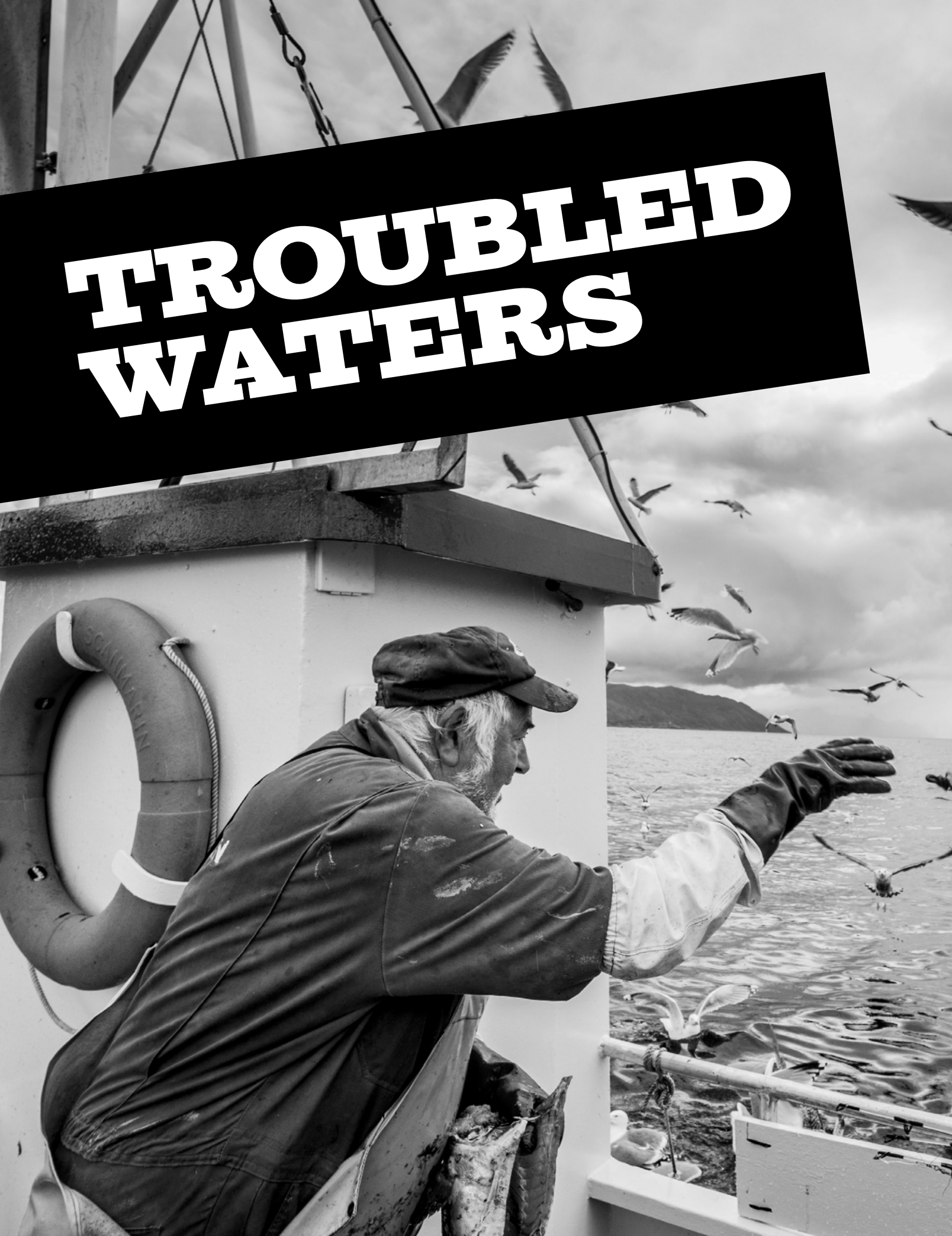


TROUBLED WATERS



What we can learn from the debate surrounding the World Surf League's ocean conservation campaign

By **KATIE RODRIGUEZ**

In January 2021, the World Surf League (WSL) sent unanticipated waves through the surfing community when their philanthropic arm, WSL Pure, went live with a campaign called “We Are One Ocean.”

“We knew that we would attract some level of pushback by taking on this issue of protecting our global ocean, but we did not anticipate the intensity of criticism, specifically from the fishing community,” says Emily Hofer, executive director of WSL Pure.

Their goal appeared somewhat simple: to gather over 1 million signatures in support of protecting our planet's oceans, with a plan to bring those signatures to the 2021 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity.

The convention, which happens once every decade and was postponed in 2020 due to the pandemic, will occur Oct. 11-24, 2021, in Kunming, China, where world leaders will gather to discuss and consider new global conservation targets for the next 10 years. In an effort to use this event as an opportunity to underscore concerns regarding our current climate crisis, the WSL set out to show that the surfing community has a powerful voice – one large enough to create a movement that would call on world leaders to adopt targets to protect 30% of our global oceans by 2030. Hence, the “30x30” appellation became affiliated with their “We Are One Ocean” campaign.

Declarations to conserve 30% of our ocean and land by 2030 are not a new concept; in fact, more than fifty countries have committed to this goal.

PHOTO: CHARL VAN ROOY

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PHOTO: RICHARD BELL

“Part of the public frustration around the initial language in the ‘We Are One Ocean’ campaign, I believe, was a carryover from the AB 3030 process, which is unfortunate.” —Casey Shedd, president of AFTCO

In January, President Joe Biden released an executive order requiring state, local, tribal, and territorial governments, landowners, fishers and other stakeholders to create a report that would outline the steps that the U.S should take to conserve 30% of our land resources and 30% of our water resources by 2030. Published in May, the resulting “America the Beautiful” report offers a community-led, nationally scaled effort to reach such goals for the stewardship of the natural world – goals that will be the first of their kind in the country.

Organizations, brands and nonprofits including Patagonia, Hunt Fish, Surfrider Foundation, Outdoor Alliance and more are unified in their support of these goals – many having launched their own 30x30 initiatives to

educate, promote and gather support in protection of natural environments in response to the climate crisis. However, none received the amount of blowback that the World Surf League has faced.

While “protecting our planet” is a platitude most people can get behind – regardless of political or recreational preferences – the question of how that goal of protecting 30% of our oceans will be achieved, and how “conservation” and “protection” are defined, has cultivated skepticism among many surfers and fishers with regard to the “We Are One Ocean” campaign.

“We can all like the destination but may not agree on which path best gets us there,” Doug Olander wrote in a statement hosted by AFTCO, the American Fishing

and Tackle Company. “In other words: as is so often the case, the devil is indeed in the details. And the fact is, there just aren’t any details yet.”

AN UNFORTUNATE MIX-UP

Bound by a need for the ocean to pursue passions and livelihoods, the surfing and fishing community run a tight-knit crew. The months following the launch of the “We Are One Ocean” campaign brought forth the most vocal fishers and surfers, sparking discourse that reverberated across social media channels and online outlets. This discourse laid bare concerns: Protection of our oceans through the implementation of marine protected areas without input from all stakeholders – especially the fishing community – would lead to ill-informed decisions about where and why these marine protected areas would be placed.

AB 3030, a California bill that called for the protection of 30% of California’s land and waters, died in the state Senate during the summer of 2020, and it quickly became fodder against the 30x30 campaign.

“AB 3030 itself represented a one-sided perspective that failed to understand the needs of the public who

interact with the public resource,” says Casey Shedd, president of AFTCO. “Part of the public frustration around the initial language in the ‘We Are One Ocean’ campaign, I believe, was a carryover from the AB 3030 process, which is unfortunate.”

AB 3030, viewed as being both vague and failing to recognize current conservation efforts in California, stirred up mistrust and discontent within the fishing community.

“On a certain level, I think [the WSL] could’ve avoided a huge amount of the conflict if they had just called the petition something different,” says Ethan Estess, a Santa Cruz marine scientist and artist. “By the time they launched it, the catchphrase ‘30x30’ had already been poisoned by the AB 3030 debacle.”

Salty Crew, an adventure apparel brand that celebrates the stories of seafarers and reps the slogan “Surf Fish Dive Sail,” was one of the first to advocate for concerns over “We Are One Ocean,” sharing on social media: “The fishing community understands that many surfers either fish themselves or at least enjoy sustainably caught seafood. That’s why we were so surprised to see the WSL push its 3.7 million Instagram followers to endorse a very vague 30x30 petition.”



PHOTO: PAUL LEINERHAND

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PHOTO: MERRITT THOMAS

“It’s really been a harsh reminder that there is no path to sustainable ocean management that doesn’t involve working collaboratively with fisheries. They’re the ones on the front lines, actually implementing new conservation strategies and regulations.” —Ethan Estess, Santa Cruz marine scientist and artist

Beach Grit, an online surf publication, followed with a blog post titled: “World Surf League backs effort to fully protect 30% of the ocean by 2030 thereby crushing small fishing operations: ‘Shame on you, WSL. If you like your fish caught by locals and not big corporations DON’T SIGN!’”

Although there was (and continues to be) no affiliation between the failed legislation and the WSL, the bill represented what was viewed as an injudicious call for protecting California’s coastlines without providing the mechanisms that would make that happen, which added misplaced fuel to the fire that surrounded “We Are One Ocean.” Not only this, but the debate surrounding the bill also poked at an old wound within the fishing community: the Marine Life Protection Act, or MLPA, of 1999.

A TUMULTUOUS HISTORY

“There is nowhere in the U.S. that has approached this the way that California did in the MLPA,” says Mark Carr, marine ecology professor at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and co-chair of the MLPA science advisory team appointed by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife.

While the story of the MLPA is, in many ways, a success story that showed one of the most progressive ocean conservation efforts through the designation of a statewide network of marine protected areas, it also put more regulations on California fishers than can be seen anywhere else in the country. This process, which Carr says involved more engaged stakeholders than any other marine resource policy in the state, is remembered by many as a contentious and arduous decade-

long battle about where protected areas should be placed. Replete with conflict over the value of marine ecosystems, as well as polarization about budget use for what was seen as an expensive process during the 2008 Great Recession, the MLPA has led to 16% of California's coastal waters becoming marine protected areas.

"The 'We Are One Ocean' campaign was designed to be a vague, general appeal to bring lots and lots of people into a feel-good petition, but in the absence of a clear stance or any real street cred on fisheries issues, it's not surprising that the fishing community projected its worst fears and grievances onto the campaign," says Estess.

Much of the contention surrounding AB 3030 spawned from the fear that more regulations would be placed in California without taking into consideration what already exists, not to mention little acknowledgment of the value of local fishing communities and the information they provide as those being on the front lines on the ocean, every day.

"In the U.S. and especially in California, recreational anglers have a long history of being lumped in with industrial fishing and indiscriminate practices," says AFTCO's Shedd. "We've been denied public access without cause, including in cases where there's no shown recreational fishing impact on fishery productivity."

It is important to note that the protected areas that came out of the MLPA process were not random nor arbitrarily placed: It involved a rigorous planning process to create science-backed guidelines that legitimized the purpose and importance of designated marine protected areas. The MLPA began with a goal of finding a common ground to decide what should be conserved or protected, what that means, and why those places were chosen for protection – unlike AB 3030.

"It's fundamentally different from these initiatives that start from a percent target and then ask: 'What are we going to do to get there?'" says Carr.



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MOVING FORWARD

While the surfing community en masse does indeed have a strong voice, so does the fishing community, with more than 50 million anglers in the U.S and a nearly \$10 billion industry. The tension surrounding the “We Are One Ocean” campaign is a micro-saga that illuminates a demand for strategy from these tightly linked groups – emphasizing process over platitudes and the inclusion of all stakeholders.

The campaign has since shifted from the target of gathering 1 million signatures to a new goal: to “reach as many people as possible,” says WSL Pure’s Emily Hofer. However, in an ironically beautiful sense, “We Are One Ocean” became more unified in their transformation throughout the campaign, responding to voiced concerns around the lack of details and revising their petition to adopt key changes – for example, switching their stance from “fully and highly protecting” 30% of the ocean to “protecting and conserving” 30% of the global ocean. Shedd shares, “It was a powerful example of the benefit of dialogue between ocean communities, users of the resource, environmental nonprofits and other citizens of this planet.”

While this campaign will not on its own lead to global policy changes on regulating our high seas, it is symbolic of what will need to happen on a global level. It begs the question: To create a strategy for reaching a global 30x30 target in the most meaningful way, how can we maximize conservation efforts while minimizing the impact on parts of the fishing industry? How can we move forward ensuring that all stakeholders – especially fishing communities, Indigenous people and others who spend the most time in these environments – are involved?

On what we can learn from “We Are One Ocean,” Estess shares: “It’s really been a harsh reminder that there is no path to sustainable ocean management that doesn’t involve working collaboratively with fisheries. They’re the ones on the front lines, actually implementing new conservation strategies and regulations, not sitting behind computer screens like the rest of us.” 🐟

The “We Are One Ocean” campaign will continue until the UN conference in October 2021. To see their revised petition, visit weareoneocean.org/learn-more.