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## Protecting the Sargasso Sea

*David E. Shaw*

ON March 11, 2014, in Hamilton, Bermuda, many representatives of national governments and nongovernmental organizations across the globe gathered in support of improved stewardship and sustainability for increasingly beleaguered oceans. It was a historic event for ocean conservation. The Hamilton Declaration on Collaboration for the Conservation of the Sargasso Sea was adopted by countries representing more than three hundred thousand linear kilometers of coastline. Adoption of the Hamilton declaration reflects an important application of science and diplomacy to stewardship of the planet's vast "high seas" in the context of perilous trends in the health of ocean ecosystems that play a vital role in sustaining life on Earth.

My involvement in the specific work that led to the Hamilton declaration began on an expedition to the Galápagos Islands in 2010. That expedition, organized by Mission Blue, was designed to address a wide range of ocean sustainability issues. My decision to join the expedition was based on a lifetime of environmental appreciation and stewardship, including several years of government service with responsibilities for natural resource agencies and programs. Living on the U.S. East Coast, I feel the ocean's presence almost daily and have traveled to spectacular ocean reefs and seascapes around the world. For many years my concern about ocean stewardship has escalated in the face of increasing evidence that key indicators of ocean health are declining. As a presidential appointee to

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the U.S. National Park Foundation, I have had the opportunity to gain a better understanding of health issues facing ocean areas within the U.S. government's jurisdiction.

The Galápagos expedition created an ideal opportunity to discuss ocean stewardship strategies with well-informed and like-minded people in an inspirational setting. By the time we departed the islands, a core group of individuals and organizations had formed around the idea of a bold initiative to create a historic conservation framework for high seas focused on an iconic region of the North Atlantic known as the Sargasso Sea. The Sargasso Sea is 1,100 kilometers wide and 3,200 kilometers long and is bound by the Gulf Stream, the North Atlantic Current, the Canary Current, and the North Atlantic Equatorial Current.

The creation and adoption of the Hamilton declaration is a tribute to the thoughtful and committed work of a multinational consortium of interested parties over the nearly four years since the Galápagos expedition. Supported largely through private philanthropic sources, the Sargasso Sea Alliance worked with distinguished scientists and leveraged other resources to assess, via peer-reviewed studies, the ecological and biological importance of the Sargasso Sea using criteria developed by the Convention on Biological Diversity in 2008:

- Uniqueness or rarity
- Importance for life history of species
- Importance for threatened, endangered, or declining species or habitats
- Vulnerability, fragility, and sensitivity
- Biological productivity
- Biological diversity
- "Naturalness"

This process demonstrated the importance of the Sargasso Sea and its worthiness for protection. It also served as the scientific foundation for developing an appropriate stewardship plan. The scientific case was widely distributed and discussed among interested parties.

A legal working group, composed of international experts on marine and terrestrial protection matters, explored a wide range of mechanisms that might be appropriate to the unique circumstances of areas, such as the Sargasso Sea, that lie beyond any national legal jurisdiction. Marine protected areas have become increasingly common within the exclusive economic zones of national jurisdiction (to two hundred nautical miles). However, these mechanisms are not applicable to areas beyond national jurisdiction, and the legal group of the alliance worked with the knowledge that its findings would likely be relevant not only to the Sargasso Sea but also to other ocean areas beyond national jurisdiction (i.e., high seas). High seas represent approximately half of the total expanse of oceans worldwide.

Input from many sources was incorporated into a range of possible protection strategies and mechanisms. After much consideration and debate, including intergovernmental meetings and liaison with a wide range of interested groups, it was decided that stewardship of the area could be best achieved via a nonbinding legal declaration by interested parties. Case studies for other successful protected areas suggest that multiparty declarations can productively evolve into more rigorous mechanisms, such as treaties, as the parties progress in their stewardship experience.

The Hamilton declaration calls for the creation of a commission to oversee stewardship for the Sargasso Sea. The government of Bermuda, with input from the other signatories and partners, will select scientists and conservationists to serve on the commission. Signatories also expect to encourage other interested nations to join the coalition. Learnings from the work of the alliance will likely be shared with other organizations seeking to enhance stewardship of world oceans.

Great stewardship is closely linked to respect and appreciation, and these in turn are greatly influenced by education, familiarity, and understanding. In this respect, the distant nature of high seas for most of humankind creates a challenge. To help address this, I made a short film about the Sargasso Sea story for audiences who will hopefully share our commitment to enhanced stewardship despite having little direct contact with this vast and unique ecosystem in the North Atlantic. With the declaration now adopted by a first round of signatories, the alliance will begin the process of implementing a stewardship system and will seek to expand the support group to include other nations.

I had the opportunity to meet recently with senior policy makers in Cuba, and many other meetings are planned. My vision is that this effort not only expands the number of stakeholders interested in protecting the Sargasso Sea, but that it also provides a road map for how to conduct conservation efforts in the high seas. The future sustainability of many species depends on it. **SD**