

Conservation Leasing & Ownership of Submerged Lands

Biography

Mike Beck is a Senior Scientist with the Marine Initiative of The Nature Conservancy and a research associate at the University of California Santa Cruz. Prior to joining the Nature Conservancy, Mike received a BA and MS from the University of Virginia and Ph.D. from Florida State University. Mike received a Fulbright Fellowship and Australian Postdoctoral Research Fellowship to conduct work at the University of Sydney, Australia.

"My current work focuses on two areas (1) marine ecoregional planning and (2) marine policy. In marine ecoregional planning, I work to develop methods for identifying high priority sites for marine conservation. I have either led or been a team member on plans for the northern Gulf of Mexico; Cook Inlet, AK; Puget Sound and Georgia Straits, WA & BC; Southern California; Northeast Pacific, OR, WA, BC, AK; southeast Atlantic, NC, SC, GA, FL; Greater & Lesser Antilles.

In marine policy, I focus on the development of new strategies for marine conservation, such as the leasing and ownership of submerged lands. It has been commonly assumed that strategies for estuarine and marine conservation must be substantially different than those for terrestrial conservation, in part because it is not possible to "buy" the seas. This is an unfortunate misconception, because in many places around the United States submerged lands are available for lease and ownership and the same appears to be true internationally."

Abstract

It has been commonly assumed that strategies for estuarine and marine conservation must be substantially different than those for terrestrial conservation, in part because it is not possible to "buy the bottom" of the publicly owned oceans. This is an unfortunate misconception. There is significant submerged land available for lease and ownership in the USA and many other countries for a diverse array of ecosystems including kelp forests, marshes, seagrass meadows, oyster reefs, tidal flats, clam beds, scallop beds, sponge and coral gardens. We explore the leasing and ownership of submerged lands as a tool for marine conservation and examine some of the benefits, considerations and strategies for the conservation and restoration of these lands.

To examine this concept in depth, we focus in the USA and on the leasing and ownership of shellfish beds. Shellfish are ideal because: (i) most state leasing programs have specific provisions for shellfish development and harvest. (ii) Shellfish habitats are amenable to restoration, conservation and management of native species in natural environments. (iii) Bivalve shellfish are critical estuarine species. (iv) The restoration and conservation of shellfish ecosystems encourages stakeholders and local communities to take a strong interest in water quality and the link between estuaries and their watersheds.

Currently most state policy on leasing and ownership is biased towards the use of natural resources for business (e.g., aquaculture) or private use (e.g., docks). As the leasing policies of various states come under review (often at the behest of industry), opportunities to include more options for conservation of leased submerged lands should be encouraged. The state of Washington has been developing a conservation leasing policy that could serve as a good model for other states.

We illustrate that that the leasing and ownership of submerged lands is a viable strategy for marine conservation, give basic guidelines for implementing the strategy and provide examples of its implementation in-the-water in Washington and New York States, USA. The leasing and ownership of submerged lands is a viable new tool to add to what has been a very limited toolkit of marine conservation strategies.