

'Let's become conscientious caretakers of the ocean'

By Sam Farr, Member of Congress

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Earlier this summer, Miami had the honor of being the launching point for a courageous sea voyage. It's a fitting honor for a city so intimately tied to our oceans.

On May 7, Margo Pellegrino left Miami on a journey of nearly 2,000 miles, paddling her 20-foot kayak on a daring odyssey to draw attention to the state of our oceans and coastal waterways. And on Friday, tired but her spirits high, Margo tied up in Camden, Maine, her 11-week marathon accomplished.

But the mission for the rest of us is just beginning. To ensure a healthy, productive future for our oceans, we must come together and devote ourselves to this worthy goal.

Luckily, we have Margo to serve as an example for us all.

She's not a professional athlete, she's a stay-at-home mom who left behind a husband and two children. She decided our oceans are important enough to test both her physical and mental endurance. Her goal was to draw the country's attention to the state of the environment and how it affects our oceans, and she has succeeded.

Margo recalled one frightening story as she neared the end of the Florida leg of her journey. She had come across a family of manatees, babies playing with their mother, snuggling and climbing on her. Suddenly, a 30-foot cruiser came charging down the channel, oblivious to the happy group.

"That boat could have wiped out an entire little family," Margo later wrote in her journal. "It seems pretty idiotic and painfully obvious that manatees and even homeowners

on the waterfront don't rate enough to get some protection from boat wakes."

This was just one of a number of instances on her trip where human interaction with the ocean was choppy. It's this sort of conflict--careless action or dangerous overdevelopment that endangers our waters and wildlife--that begs for a nationally maintained, regionally interpreted, locally implemented ocean policy.

Consider harmful algal blooms, those red tides that have such horrible effects on birds, fish, marine mammals, even people. They are kindled by coastal pollution, especially nitrogen and phosphorous runoff from fertilizer. And they're getting worse. The dead zone in the Gulf of Mexico now covers several thousand square miles, extending as far west as Texas.

To keep our wildlife safe and ensure the health of our oceans, we urgently need a national ocean policy that will help balance those competing forces. For too long our oceans have been governed by an overlapping, often conflicting patchwork of federal, state and local agencies. Instead of this slipshod approach, we must establish a policy that stresses that importance of regional management based on eco-systems.

My solution to these problems is Oceans-21, a bill I introduced in Congress earlier this year. The legislation (H.R. 21) would implement the highest priority recommendations of the Joint Ocean Commission, helping to secure the full range of benefits that healthy marine ecosystems provide.

Florida has so much to gain from coordinated policies.

The Everglades, so integral to Southern Florida, would benefit from regional governance that acknowledges their importance. Oceans-21 would enhance and build upon efforts such as the Comprehensive Everglades Restoration Plan. Many of the manatees that Margo worried over would benefit from an inclusive approach, drawing on boaters and conservationists alike.

Even now there are some hopeful signs. Florida offers exciting programs that introduce many people to our oceans, the best way to ensure that future generations will be conscientious

caretakers. The recreational boating and fishing communities are wonderful ambassadors to our waters, and encouraging the growth of those industries is a necessity.

It will take effort from all of us to help protect our oceans, but with Margo as our guide, I think we all have the will to succeed.

(U.S. Rep. Sam Farr, D-Calif., is co-chair of the House Oceans Caucus.)