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Rhode Island's key coastal role

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When vacationers migrate to America's shores this summer, they will not be alone: 180 million people will visit our coastline this year for sun, swimming, fishing, and inspiration. They will join a third of the world's population, two billion of us, who live in the ribbon of land within 50 miles of the coast. Aside from aesthetics, we live in the coastal zone for economic opportunities in fishing, shipping, industry and tourism, that directly link one-sixth of U.S. jobs to the marine environment. These social and economic activities have consequences for the coastal resources on which we rely. Our marine ecosystems are in biological and physical decline, and will continue to degrade without new approaches to living on the coast.

Coastal issues have become a global priority in the 1990s. Interest marshaled by the 1992 United Nation Conference on Environment and Development (the "Earth Summit") in Rio de Janeiro, which called upon countries to "pursue the protection and sustainable development of the marine and coastal environment" has led to international initiatives to protect coral reefs, prevent marine pollution, and understand the roles of the oceans in global climate change. This year we are marking the International Year of the Ocean to celebrate our understanding and in the marine realm, and to rededicate ourselves to taking care of it.

In America, the negative impacts of a growing coastal population are often focused on development overrunning once-quiet towns and the diminishing quality of waters and wetlands. We have learned how to confront these problems through the coordinated efforts of communities concerned about their quality of life. The public and private sectors have nurtured the remarkable resilience of natural systems to restore ecosystems in Boston Harbor, the Potomac River and Sarasota Bay. There is still much work to be done, but we seem to understand the planning and management

processes that will keep our resource uses sustainable.

In developing countries, where annual incomes are usually less than the cost of a week's vacation for the average American, the outlook is less optimistic. The world shares marine environmental problems—over-fishing, habitat destruction, nutrient and toxic pollutants, invasive species, pathogens—among all countries. What the U.S. is uniquely able to share with the developing world is the understanding of how to cope with these threats.

Rhode Island, the Ocean State, is playing a key role in training international colleagues to govern the inexorable development of the ocean's fringe. Rhode Island's coastal management program was created in the early 1970s, one of the first in the U.S. Since 1985, the University of Rhode Island's Coastal Resources Center (CRC) has worked in partnership with the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to bring principles established here to developing nations throughout the world. As the summer season begins, more than two dozen professionals from 15 coastal nations acquired tools to manage coastal pressures at the fifth biannual Summer Institute in Coastal Management in Rhode Island. Participants share success stories and horror stories alike, learning adaptive strategies equally applicable to challenges faced at a salt pond in Rhode Island or a coral reef in Kenya. Through this program, the U.S. has advanced our international efforts to protect biodiversity manage climate change and promote economic growth. CRC has also gained new perspectives and experience in the elements of coastal management. And the participants from over 50 countries have acquired tools needed to lead their nations' coastal programs. One participant from Malaysia now working in the Bay of Bengal in the Indian Ocean said, "Everything

has come together like a jigsaw puzzle and given me a new perception of what coastal management is all about. It's a very valuable experience."

From an educational standpoint, integrated coastal management is an ideal model of integrated learning. Public communication and marine geochemistry alike require integrated problem-solving skills. Coastal issues are inherently interdisciplinary, demanding that students think across the disciplines of economics, environmental science, and public policy, and can provide a road map for navigating future business markets. The ability to encompass the big picture is an important skill for anyone in today's job market. Developing that skill must be a key goal in educational reform efforts.

Coastal professionals from the South Pacific, Africa, Europe, Central America and Southeast Asia are framing these visions at a tiny campus on the shores of Narragansett Bay. The U.S. is helping them learn from our experiences, and we are benefiting from theirs. As economies become more global in nature, integrated programs like this will become more commonplace and vital to meet the challenges of an expanding population. In the Year of the Ocean, the Ocean State might be the perfect place for thinking about an equitable future for our coasts and all of us who live there.

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