

STATEMENT OF
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CITY OF ALPENA, MICHIGAN
before the
COMMITTEE ON NATURAL RESOURCES
SUBCOMMITTEE ON FISHERIES, WILDLIFE AND OCEANS
UNITED STATES HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
OVERSIGHT HEARING ON THE
NATIONAL MARINE SANCTUARIES ACT

June 18, 2008

Good afternoon, Madam Chair and members of the Committee. My name is Carol Shafto. I am the Mayor of Alpena and I have been a Sanctuary Advisory Council member for twelve years, nine of those serving as the Council Chair. Thank you for the opportunity to testify on this oversight hearing on the reauthorization of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act.

You perhaps know of the importance of national marine sanctuaries to the nation. I am here today to share their significant positive impact on local communities. Alpena, a very rural area 100 miles from the nearest freeway, is today a different place, a better place, since NOAA designated the Thunder Bay National Marine Sanctuary eight years ago. NOAA's mission is to protect a nationally significant collection of shipwrecks, superbly preserved in the cold fresh water of Lake Huron. In so doing NOAA has also helped protect our local heritage, our tourism, our economy. The sanctuary has brought enhanced recreational opportunities, educational initiatives, research capabilities and economic development to us and all of northeast Michigan.

Today, the City of Alpena is in a trusted partnership with NOAA. It didn't start off that way when NOAA first proposed a sanctuary more than a decade ago and "Say No to NOAA" buttons were proudly worn around town. We innately distrust hierarchy and the federal government is as far away as you can get in the continuum that has Alpena at one end and Washington, DC at the other. I don't intend to dwell on the past, but you need to know where we started to truly understand how far we have come in embracing the National Marine Sanctuary Program. What began as distrust and fear – of the unknown and change - has turned into the question, "Where would we be today without the sanctuary?" It is truly difficult to imagine Alpena not being part of a system that protects some of the most spectacular resources in the country. From fishermen to the Chamber of Commerce, everyday citizens of Alpena have been integrally involved in the designation, growth and development of the sanctuary, every step of the way. We went through a process that established the trust that now runs deep. Federal staff are now our neighbors. They volunteer at our local functions, send their children to our schools, attend our churches. At all levels, NOAA is integrated into the fabric of local life.

National marine sanctuaries have positive economic impacts on communities. This past weekend, the Thunder Bay sanctuary held the grand opening of the new exhibits in NOAA's Great Lakes Maritime Heritage Center which opened in 2005. The significance of this event goes beyond the opening of a visitors' center. Just three months after the Thunder Bay sanctuary was designated, the Fletcher Paper Mill closed after 100 years of operation. Jobs were lost and hopes were dashed. Now that piece of property holds a different hope for Alpena. The sanctuary is the anchor of a major adaptive reuse development that attracts tens of thousands of visitors as well as bringing relatively invisible underwater heritage to the awareness of the local people. The redevelopment of this old paper mill complex has begun a shift from an industrial community, reliant on our deep-water port and the industry that surrounds it, to a more stable diversified economy bringing a sense of optimism for the future. Alpena, not on the way to anywhere, is now a national treasure – a true maritime heritage destination. By putting us on the national map, NOAA has helped us look at ourselves with brighter eyes.

Local sanctuary advisory councils are an integral part of every national marine sanctuary. It is easy for agencies to give lip service to these types of councils – and they rarely have much influence. From the beginning, the Thunder Bay Sanctuary Advisory Council's recommendations were taken seriously by NOAA. As chair of the Council, I've had the opportunity to attend national meetings of the Council chairs from every sanctuary around the nation. From this experience, it is clear to me that across the board, sanctuary advisory councils are making a difference. This doesn't happen without a commitment from the federal agency. Time after time, NOAA has demonstrated that it understands how important it is to have local stakeholders as partners. NOAA implements system-wide policy and core mission values while incorporating local autonomy, community character and pride.

Thunder Bay Advisory Council recently recommended that NOAA expand the boundaries from 448 square miles to 3,662 square miles. Endorsement for such a boundary expansion would have been inconceivable even five years ago. Today there is broad support for this expansion from all of the local units of government in the affected region. Why expand? We know that ships do not sink along artificially drawn political boundaries. We want to redraw the dotted lines on the map to protect deep, intact shipwrecks that are some of the best preserved in the Great Lakes. And why now? Because we have integrated the mission of management and protection as our own. Here, and wherever sensitive national treasures are at risk. Senator Carl Levin recently introduced a bill in the Senate for Thunder Bay expansion and Representative Bart Stupak has now done the same in the House. Without a doubt, the support of the Advisory Council has opened this door of possibility.

In my capacity as the Sanctuary Advisory Council chair, I have visited the Florida Keys, Grays Reef, Monterey Bay, and Channel Islands sanctuaries – all on our two great oceans. Thunder Bay is the only freshwater sanctuary. We sit on the shores of the sweetwater sea with a new appreciation and affinity for the oceans. We are connected in the mission of resource protection. We fight for the survival of things we have never seen, in places we will never visit. We are a part of a national system of something so much bigger than us – or of any single sanctuary. The physical setting may change and the specific issues different from site to site, but we are one system, working together, sharing a common responsibility for protecting nationally significant resources across the United States.

Eight years ago at the Thunder Bay designation ceremony three levels of government - federal, state and local came together in partnership. Representing local government I said, "For the people of Alpena, the waters of Lake Huron are more than a sanctuary. They are our home, our recreation, our livelihood, our quality of life. In entering into partnership with state and federal governments for the management of the shipwrecks in the bay, we shake hands with strangers who hold our future in their hands. We do this with welcome, with friendship, and with trust that you will continue to safeguard not only the shipwrecks but the well-being of those for whom Thunder Bay is a way of life." I am gratified to report to you today that this trust has been honored and our partnership is not only intact but strengthened for the future of Alpena and the National Marine Sanctuaries Program. I offer our unwavering endorsement of the reauthorization of the National Marine Sanctuaries Act. Thank you.