

Getting Organized

Kenneth Brink

The ocean sciences are exciting simply as basic research, but they also have a range of practical applications in areas including fisheries management, defense applications, weather forecasting and safe navigation. In a way, this diversification of end users expresses a great strength of the science since there is such a diverse constituency. On the other hand, this diversity is also one of the field's historical weaknesses. This paradox occurs because so many different agencies have their own ocean science programs, each going off in its own direction. While this breadth certainly has some healthy aspects, it has the potential of making the whole of the federal ocean science dollar be worth no more than the sum of its parts.

The loss of opportunities for coordination that occurred in the past probably happened mainly because of the need for each agency to reach its own objectives in its own order of priority. In the past, there had been a potential for different agencies to fund redundant work and not to seek synergies. One can even find folklore to the effect that one agency wanted a given result, and found science to support it, while another agency sought another result, and found credible grounds for that as well.

The reality, however, was more nearly represented by program managers within different agencies struggling to build bridges to other agencies and programs. Many success stories along this line can be cited, and a

number of genuine heroes named. Coordination at this management level had its own serious problems, for example, of finding the funds to do complementary projects at the same time, rather than separated by a few years. There were also plenty of examples of agencies or offices that simply did not do a good job of coordinating projects.

Clearly, some order had to be provided. The need became all the more pressing as we looked forward to the implementation of large, multi-user projects such as a truly global observing system, an important task for which no one agency can now be expected to find the resources. Enter the National Oceanographic Partnership Program (NOPP). There now exists a channel by which agencies can cooperate on a range of levels, from the very top to the level of the individual scientist. So, agency goals can be coordinated as well as individual research efforts. Further, NOPP makes a serious effort to bring the private sector to the table in terms of planning and execution. These results are all positive consequences of the NOPP effort, but they may be only the beginning. One can imagine the strength of programs conceived at the outset to take advantage of strong ties between different federal agencies, states and the private sector. It is genuinely the beginning of a new way of doing business.

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