International Collaborations

SEVERAL YEARS AGO, I participated in a fairly animated conversation with several other science administrators. We were agitating over the possibility of there being a new international crisis brought about by an oceanographic research project. It seemed that an ARGO float—a passive float designed to collect ocean water temperature—was about to drift from open ocean, international waters into the territorial waters of a country that did not openly share scientific data and a country with which the United States had strained diplomatic relations regarding environmental matters. ARGO floats are designed to drift at predetermined depths for periods of time, recording temperature and other variables, then rise to the surface and transmit via satellite their position and the recorded oceanographic data. The float would then re-submerge and repeat the process. There was concern that a surfaced float transmitting environmental data from within territorial waters might bring about diplomatic repercussions. As it turns out, an ocean scientist from that country communicated with government officials there and assured them that the project was purely scientific and that the float was only drifting with the ocean currents. There was no crisis and the float eventually drifted back into international waters.

This story underscores the obvious fact that ocean processes are not constrained by diplomatic or political boundaries. Atmospheric, terrestrial, and oceanic conditions and processes are inextricably intertwined and constrained only by geographic and geophysical boundaries. Progress in understanding important global processes depends on understanding how those processes interact and what their impacts are on all scales, from local to global, over minutes or decades.

As noted in the U.S. Ocean Action Plan, "Oceans are inherently global in nature," and many of the research and educational activities undertaken by most countries naturally include international components. "Since ocean issues present the international community with shared challenges, they also offer unique opportunities to build positive, long-term collaborative relationships."

The Oceanography Society (TOS) was established to facilitate such collaborative relationships. Its mission is to disseminate knowledge of oceanography and its application through research and education, to promote communication among oceanographers, and to provide a constituency for consensus building across all the disciplines of the field. Nearly all citizens of the world depend on the oceans. The oceans provide vital food and energy supplies, facilitate waterborne commerce, and create valuable recreational opportunities. It is clearly within the TOS mission to include the international ocean community in meetings and conferences that share research results and disseminate knowledge.

The 2005 International Ocean Conference marks the third meeting that TOS has convened in Europe. Featured topics, such as Harmful Algal Blooms, Black Sea Biogeochemistry, and International Year of the Polar Ocean are clearly of international interest. Strong partnerships between scientists from different countries facilitate agreements on how international science initiatives should be conducted and how results should be shared. Such partnerships can also be used to build scientific capacity in other nations. Global programs function most effectively when all parties can participate fully. In addition to expanding scientific knowledge and stimulating technological development and capacity-building programs, international collaborations create goodwill and strengthen ties with other nations.

TOS welcomes membership by interested ocean scientists and students from all countries and will continue to work to facilitate the exchange of information and knowledge of the oceans. Through these interactions, we will be better able to preserve the productivity and health of the oceans and to secure cooperation among nations everywhere in managing marine assets wisely.

LARRY CLARK, TOS PRESIDENT