

# Effectively Engaging the Visiting Public in Fisheries Policy

A Proven Approach for Aquariums and Zoos to Adapt and Implement



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Dear Aquarium and Zoo partners,

We have an important opportunity to engage the public in safeguarding our ocean and advancing science-based fisheries and healthy, sustainable marine ecosystems in the United States.

In the near future, Congress is likely to revisit and revise our national ocean fisheries policies. These policies are centered around the [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#), the primary fisheries law in the United States. But they also include other laws and regulations, existing and proposed, such as the recently introduced Forage Fish Conservation Act. The Magnuson-Stevens Act, especially in its previous two reauthorizations, 1996 and 2006, has been characterized by a science-based approach, and that has proven to be the best way to conserve fish populations, protect other wildlife, and sustain fishing communities. Indeed, this law has become a successful model for the world.

We know that public input is a vital part of public policy. As Tom Adams, Policy Advisor to The Ocean Project, noted however, “the current reality is that many of us who want fish on our plates and fish in the ocean will never have heard of fisheries policy.” This is where together we can help! Our core challenge going forward is to ensure that public opinion is part of public policy, and that sound science stays ahead of special interests.

Recent efforts developed and implemented by The Ocean Project in partnership with six aquariums, and with the Aquarium Conservation Partnership have shown exciting results! By engaging the public in the quick and easy ways outlined in this guide visitors not only are appreciative of the opportunity to learn about these policies, but also willing, and, in many instances, eager to express their support for them by signing a comment card to Congress. In other words, just two minutes of talking with visitors about this issue can have a big impact for the ocean, *and* visitors will thank you for doing so!

This guide would not have been possible without those efforts, so I want to specifically thank The Florida Aquarium, Mystic Aquarium, New England Aquarium, Seattle Aquarium, Texas State Aquarium and the Virginia Aquarium and Marine Science Center, as well as Douglas Meyer, who led the effort for The Ocean Project. Importantly, this work is funded in part by the [Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation](#) and also from contributions from our [aquarium and zoo supporters](#).

So, **thank you** for participating going forward! Together we can, and will, make a difference for our blue planet.

Sincerely,



Bill Mott  
Executive Director  
March 2020

## Overarching Goals

The approach outlined in this guide was developed to achieve the following goals with an easily implemented engagement that would take only a couple of minutes of a visitor's time.

Primary goals:

- Raise visitor awareness of sustainable seafood issues
- Document visitor support for science-based fisheries management policies (by asking them to sign a comment card to Congress)

Secondary goals:

- Enhance recognition of the role of aquariums and zoos in conservation
- Maintain the overall quality of the visitor experience

## Expected Results

Based on experience to date, with more than 20,000 visitors engaged, more than 5,000 cards signed, and more than 2,000 exit surveys completed in phases [one](#) and [two](#) across six different sites, our expectation is that aquariums and zoos implementing this approach will experience the following results:

1. **Engaged visitors – those who receive the messaging and the ask to sign a comment card – on average will have higher awareness and support for these issues** than those who were not engaged. They also on average will have higher levels of belief that their actions can make a difference.
2. **Engaged visitors will on average have more recognition and appreciation for aquariums and zoos as conservation leaders**, with higher visitor satisfaction scores.
3. **Approximately 15-25% of engaged visitors will sign a card** (which we reference below as the “conversion rate”).
4. **Policymakers will welcome this feedback.** Many of those who participated in the pilot phase already have informed policymakers of the response from their visitors and were given a receptive and attentive audience.
5. **Staff will like it too!** During the pilot phases we also asked staff what they thought of the approach, and whether they would recommend it to other aquariums and zoos. Without exception the response was positive, with one staffer summing up their feelings as follows, “Absolutely! It was heartening to hear...guests respond along the lines of ‘Thank you all for making it so easy!’ They clearly understood, and appreciated, the (effort).”

## **The Recipe for Success**

### **1. Identify the setting**

When assessing the amount of effort against the goals, the recommended setting is where a staff member can present to a large gathering, such as the start of an animal presentation, film screening, or other large group gathering, and then deliver the messaging as referenced below with a direct appeal to sign a card.

A second choice is to use a short video announcement, again at the start of an animal presentation, film screening, or other large group gathering, that is based on the messaging as referenced below. (While for many it will be cost prohibitive to consider this option, those based in the Northeast can consider using the PSA developed by Mystic Aquarium and the New England Aquarium. Please contact [bmott@theoceanproject.org](mailto:bmott@theoceanproject.org) if you are interested in this possibility.)

### **2. Adapt the script**

A consistent point of feedback from the sites that helped to develop this approach was to “stick to the script,” which is based on [years of research](#) and [experimental efforts](#) led by The Ocean Project, and aligns with the sound advice from [Heartwired for the Ocean](#), a messaging initiative supported by the David and Lucile Packard Foundation.

The approach is grounded in The Ocean Project’s research, which underscores the potential of aquarium and zoo visits, noting that this is a time when people expect, trust and appreciate conservation messaging. That research also notes that visitors are more inspired by emotional stories about specific animals and particular places (rather than facts and figures about the ocean as a whole), and more interested when the emphasis is on how they can contribute to the solution (rather than the nature or extent of the problem). At the same time, this research cautions that attention spans are limited and that the interest sparked by a visit can wane quickly, so this is why it is helpful to be concise and give visitors an action step, such as signing the card, that can be taken then and there.

The approach recommended here also aligns with what the Heartwired for the Ocean report refers to as, “the redemption frame,” which can be summarized as acknowledging in the messaging that people have made mistakes in their prior treatment of the ocean and its animals, and then presenting them with an opportunity to help make amends.

Below are the essential elements of the recommended messaging, with a reminder that less can be more! The test sites covered these points, whether in person or on video, in approximately two minutes, and still achieved impressive results. As a starting point, we suggest reviewing the core elements, included below, as well as the sample script (Appendix A).

**a. Consider previewing the ask as part of a welcome**

- **Tip:** Many noted that staff already does “welcome” visitors, or under this effort would be “welcoming” visitors, to an amphitheater or theater setting, and that holding up an example of the card and “previewing the ask” during that welcome can help visitors understand the engagement.

**b. Begin with the news of a local species that had been in trouble but has been doing better, ideally one with which visitors will be familiar**

- **Select a fish:** At Mystic Aquarium and New England Aquarium, they used the story of the Acadian Redfish. If you’re looking for another option near you, or are speaking specifically to forage fish, you may wish to consult, consult [fishwatch.gov](http://fishwatch.gov) for more information.
- **Tip:** When presenting, hold up a picture or cutout of the fish you are using as your example, and/or, as applicable, let them know if they can see one at your aquarium or zoo. Note that the fish images available at [fishwatch.gov](http://fishwatch.gov) can be used for this purpose!

**c. Add the benefits brought by that recovery to the surrounding ecosystem and/or local economy**

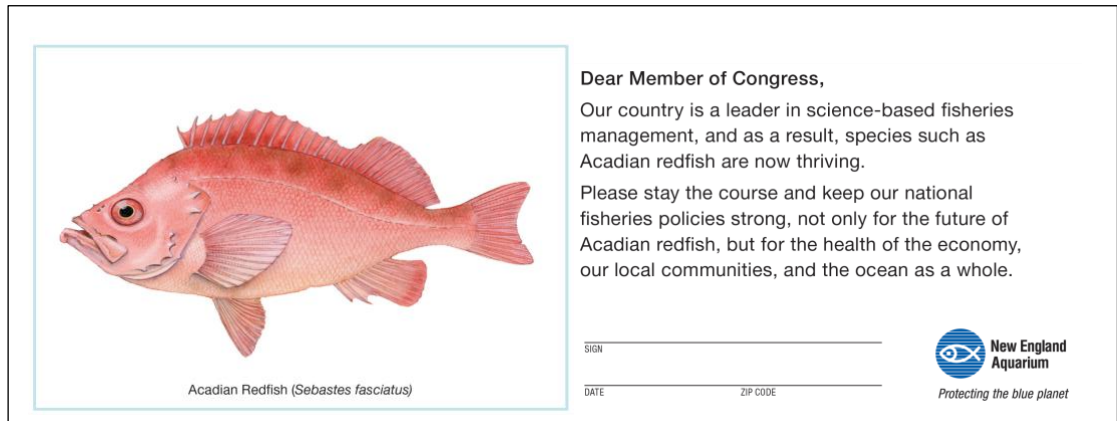
- **Identify the additional benefit(s):** How does this fish fit in the local ecosystem, or how is it important to the local economy?
- **Tip:** When presenting, consider creative ways to bring this point to life, such as by adding costuming related to the importance to your local fishing industry, incorporating a prop related to the popularity of a fish at local restaurants, and/or interpreting an ecologically important interaction between that fish and others, even one that might be seen at your aquarium or zoo.

**d. Connect this success back to national policy, while giving the visitor a supporting role**

- **Connect to the individual:** *Example: “This turnaround has been made possible by people like you and companies like (INSERT NAME OF YOUR FOOD SERVICE PROVIDER), who guided by programs like Seafood Watch (or insert your own equivalent) have been increasingly willing to make sustainable seafood choices”*
- **Pivot to policy:** *Example: “And also because we as a country have been doing a much better job managing our fisheries in a way that is science-based, looking at the survival of the species and the health of our ocean when considering how much to catch”*
- **Tip:** Consider underscoring the role individuals can and have played by printing and using the provided poster of a wallet card by Seafood Watch. Some sites provided a QR code to enable easy downloads of the Seafood Watch app.

e. **Relay the urgency, and ask if visitors will join with your aquarium or zoo in a show of support by signing a comment card**

- **Use the model to create your own cards**, highlighting the fish you are using as your example, and, of course, including your own logo. Be sure to include a space for guests to note their home zip code, as that will help you identify their representatives.



- **Make the ask and underscore the potential outcome:** *Example:* “Congress is getting ready to review how we manage our national fisheries. Here at (INSERT YOUR AQUARIUM OR ZOO), our message is “stay with science” (or “science is good for the fish and good for fishing”) as while (INSERT LOCAL FISH EXAMPLE) is doing better, we’ve still got a long way to go to ensure that all of our seafood is sustainable seafood. This is why I’m hoping you will join us in relaying that message by signing one of the cards...it’s a small step for each of us, but together we can make a big difference”
- **Tip: Pick the best option for distributing and collecting cards**, depending on the layout of your site. Where possible, a personal touch (a card passed out or picked up directly by a staff member) and social reinforcement (being seen signing a card) have proven to be pluses!
  - **Options:**
    - Have a staff member hand a card and pen to each guest as they enter or exit, and ask them to place completed cards in clearly marked boxes
    - Have a staff member pass the cards and pens down the aisles as guests are listening to the presentation, and then collect the completed cards from the other side, much as is done in some churches with a collection basket
    - Point to poster boards with the cards pre-mounted near the exits and provide pens for people to use

As noted above, please consider using signs and props, which for the forage fish effort will be developed with the Aquarium Conservation Partnership.

### 3. Monitor and evaluate

- a. **Track the conversion rate and count the number of cards collected.** The number of people receiving the messaging and ask, relative to the number completing a card, is the “conversion rate,” which is a key indicator of success. As noted above, we anticipate a conversion rate of approximately 15-25% from this engagement. So, it is important to track, even if only an approximation, how many visitors had the opportunity to sign a card, as well as how many cards were actually collected, in order to know the extent to which the engagement was successful.
- b. **Ask for staff feedback.** Staff who are involved in delivering the message, or providing the cards, often have great insights into what is working especially well, and what might be falling flat, with a particular audience. Three simple questions have proven to yield helpful feedback:
  - What is the one thing that you liked best about this engagement?
  - What is one thing you would change about this engagement?
  - Would you recommend this engagement to another aquarium or zoo?
- c. **Exit surveys are not recommended.** For those sites that would like to conduct their own exit surveys, the survey instrument can be made available. However, the test sites caution that doing the required data collection is very time intensive and, given the consistency of the response from the prior surveys, unlikely to yield any additional actionable insights.

### 4. Relay your findings

You have collected the contact cards, now what? The sheer number of cards you will have collected, let alone the broad geographic range represented, will be an eye-opener for congressional offices, which, if smart and politically astute, will understand the unique and direct way you can communicate with their constituents whose votes they need. In other words, the collected cards can be used as a teaching moment and opportunity to expand an office’s knowledge of what you do, how you do it, and your audience reach. But before sharing the cards it’s important to inventory and organize them to maximize their impact. Here are a few suggestions:

- a. **Inventory and copy.** Count the total number of cards collected and consider scanning a cross-section of cards that is representational.
- b. **Sort by geography.** Not only will this give you an opportunity to gauge the reach of your audience in your community and beyond, but also you can determine how many cards were collected for Members of Congress in your delegations and across the country.
  - **Ideally sort by zip code.** [Find Representatives](#) enables staff to easily sort cards by congressional district. As but one example, Mystic Aquarium and New England Aquarium recently collected cards from guests who lived in 165 (38% of the House of the Representatives) different congressional offices, coast to coast!



- **If you are unable to sort by zip code, sort by state.** This is especially the case if your location serves markets in more than one state or if a significant portion of your visitation is tourist related.
- c. **Pull a subset that appear to be done by children and students.** Pay special attention those that perhaps include drawings or personal notes. These will be the most compelling to congressional offices so make sure they're on the top of any stack of cards delivered.
- d. **Develop a written “drop off” message.** Essentially, a cover letter that include basic facts about your institution (e.g., annual visitation, membership, employees), as well as specifics about this effort (e.g., how visitors were engaged; the total number of cards collected; the number from their state or district; the number of different districts from which cards were collected; and, perhaps a good anecdotal story gathered from individual engagement with your guests).
- e. **Deliver the cards to decision makers.** We recommend sharing the collected cards with the offices of your congressional delegation (House and Senate) either while you are in Washington, DC or with one of their district offices. Find the right person and their contact information by going to the office's website which can be done with the following links.
  - **To find your Representative, click:** [Find Representatives](#)
  - **To find your Senator, click:** [Find Senators](#)
  - **Arranging a visit with staff in DC:** Almost every website for members of the House and Senate now includes a meeting request form. Best to submit the form one month before your trip and use the meeting message points you've developed. You may also want to consider prioritizing offices that received a high number of cards, or walking in and dropping the cards off at the front desk works great, too. A few days after submitting the meeting request form, call the office and ask to speak to the scheduler. It is likely that they will arrange a meeting with a staff member – don't let that deter you because they are the people who recommend that their boss take or not take certain actions.
  - **For meetings with staff in a district office:** Call their offices and either ask for a meeting in their office or invite them to your zoo/aquarium for a meeting, tour or event. Make sure you tell them you want to share the cards and explain how they were collected, again using the meeting message points you've developed. A core responsibility of district staff is to meet with constituents and relay the information to their appropriate colleagues in the DC office.
  - **Cards from out of market states** should be delivered by a “drop-by meeting” when you or a colleague are in Washington, DC. If you can't get to DC, contact [tadams@theoceanproject.org](mailto:tadams@theoceanproject.org) and we will work with you to try to make arrangements to deliver them to the appropriate office.



**f. Other ideas**

- **Frame the cards and turn them into wall art.** For offices that fall within your market or state, make the impression of your drop-off meeting last by framing a sampling of a few cards, a couple of pictures of the visitors being engaged, and your logo. You can also include a short message of thanks or appreciation. The idea is to make it appealing and something that might be hung in the office which will keep you in their minds – and something you can point to on your future visits.

Please don't hesitate to contact us about any of the above! We recognize that each aquarium and zoo is unique, and we are happy to talk with you about how best to adapt this successful model to the specifics of your site.

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**Appendix A: Fisheries Policy Public Engagement – Sample Script**

Today I'll be asking for your support on an important ocean issue. Our nation has beautiful beaches, incredible marine life, and amazing seafood! And fishing for that seafood is an integral part of our history and culture. But balancing a healthy ocean and healthy fisheries can be tricky.

(INSERT YOUR LOCAL FISH EXAMPLE) are a great example of how it can be done. *Only a few years ago, we here at (INSERT YOUR AQUARIUM/ZOO) were quite concerned about the future of (INSERT YOUR LOCAL FISH EXAMPLE), but recently we've had cause for hope.*"

People just like you started making sustainable seafood choices, often using guides like the one I have here in my hand, or you might have it on your phone. (SHOW SEAFOOD WATCH GUIDE) And scientists and fishermen (IF APPLICABLE – and right here in INSERT YOUR STATE) worked together with policymakers to create laws to manage all of the fisheries for (INSERT YOUR LOCAL FISH EXAMPLE).

Science-based fisheries management plans were then *implemented beginning in the 1990's* to help *these and other* fish recover. After almost 30 years of management and study, both commercial and recreational fishers are able to catch these fish in a sustainable way, so that the fish populations remain healthy, and the surrounding ecosystem, the fishing community, and, of course, all of us who like seafood benefit. And that includes (INSERT CHARISMATIC PREDATOR SPECIES HERE), as they also enjoy eating (INSERT YOUR LOCAL FISH EXAMPLE)!

Here at (INSERT YOUR AQUARIUM/ZOO) we believe it is important to stay the course, and continue with strong, science-based fisheries management. And that by working together, we can have a healthy ocean and sustainable seafood for generations to come.

If you agree, please let us know by signing a comment card at (INSERT SPECIFIC LOCATION), and we'll share your support with our representatives who will be reviewing these policies this year.