
An Untapped Resource for Intergovernmental Organizations: Ocean Waste Environmental NGOs

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ABSTRACT

Amidst the lack of global attention towards our deteriorating oceans, ENGOs can aid the formation of streamlined regulatory ocean policies, but experience restricted access to intergovernmental policy-making committees and resemble outsiders to governing bodies with formal authority. A current debate exists concerning the quantitative benefit towards commons preservation that non-governmental intervention would provide. Through literature reviews, participant observations, website evaluations, and qualitative interviews, we have discovered that ocean conservation NGOs do provide necessary civil perspective, expertise, advocacy, and education to the high-level discourse regarding land-based and ocean waste regulations. Within the UN, promising intergovernmental recommendations that encourage more NGO involvement comprise of inviting representatives from credible NGOs to attend high-level policy-making committees, increasing participation of NGO coalitions at global conventions and forums, and allocating more resources to the development of NGO-staffed governing bodies. Our research sheds light upon the overlooked potential outreach of an effective waste regulation model on global societal well-being. Furthermore, policy implications for a global participatory democracy that incorporates government, business, and civil society point towards a robust global mindset about ocean conservation.

Keywords: Global Commons, Environmental Policy, Non-Governmental Organization, Non-Profit Organization, United Nations, Waste Regulation.

INTRODUCTION

The world's intergovernmental and civil organizations have failed in working together to effectively regulate our oceans, which are part of the Global Commons. The Global Commons represent any area that is not under the control of an individual nation (United Nations Environment Programme, 2003). Part of an increasingly complicated situation, our world's oceans face environmental pressures from the ever-growing population of the earth. The ocean waste crisis has taken front stage along with the eminence of severe pollution, death of ocean ecosystems, and climate change. With the doctrine of *mare liberum* (free sea for everyone) allowing companies to freely dump waste in the high seas (United Nations Environment Programme, 2003), startling research highlighting that 80% of marine waste comes from land-based activities (Garces, 2016), and millions of people dying from the contaminated seafood and water (Hines, 2001), the ocean waste crisis commands attention from the global community. Third-world countries as well as developed countries all suffer from the lack of knowledge, regulation, professionalism, and advocacy revolving around trash in our oceans. Efforts have already been made in the formation of the United Nations Environment Program, specifically the divisions of environmental law and conventions (DELIC), environmental policy implementation (DEPI), and communications and public information (DCPI). In the ocean governance sphere, the United Nations serves as a developer and an implementer of policy along with national governments. Also, the United Nations has established the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, which provides the grounds with which certain politicians and government officials edit and create laws. Though individuals and governments have tried to establish property rights to parts of the seas, no attempt has been successful because no actor is sufficiently large enough to have any significant effect on the global climate change problem (Engel, 2005). With the seas covering almost 70% of the

surface of the earth, identifying which parts are under what state’s responsibilities proves to be very difficult because of the lack of delineation and knowledge surrounding ocean governance (Rinkesh, 2009). These problems set the stage for more collaboration amongst organizations, businesses, and governments.

Currently, NGOs have experienced a lack of access to intergovernmental organizations and resemble outsiders to governing bodies with formal authority (Breitmeier & Rittberger, 1998; Dreger, 2008). A current debate exists with regards to whether intervention by sub-global or non-governmental groups would further negatively affect commons preservation or not (Hardin, 1968). Though an argument exists that points towards non-governmental intervention being insufficient or unneeded for governing the waste in the seas, scholars and intergovernmental organizations often overlook the beneficial motivations, initiatives, and support that non-governmental organizations and sub-global organizations can provide. NGOs can transcend national limitations because they are not bounded by the state and can act independently of it when undertaking campaigns. Therefore, NGOs can embrace a softer approach in waste regulation through advocacy and education. A promising solution for commons preservation would be to encourage more NGO involvement within UN practice. Since the UN is mainly government and state driven, it lacks the flexibility that NGOs enjoy. Another possible solution for the UN would be to encourage more collaboration with NGOs about the current situation revolving around ocean waste and use NGO mission statements, objectives, and spheres of influence to complement the efforts of the UN. Furthermore, the inclusion of NGOs on intergovernmental bodies can add expertise, advice, and civil perspective to pushing for specific policies that will govern both land-based waste disposal activities and our seas.

The innumerable problems associated with waste prove to yield optimistic effects if solved effectively through NGO involvement, which builds a more robust regulation model for the UN on oceanic waste management. Waste management ties closely with the success of the Sustainable Development Goals of 2030, namely “Zero Hunger”, “Clean Water and Sanitation”, “Good Health and Well Being”, “Sustainable Cities and Communities”, “Responsible Consumption and Production”, “Climate Action”, and “Life Below Water” (United Nations, 2015). This research aims to identify the factors that contribute most to the success of the NGOs and how the UN can utilize NGOs as valuable resources. By integrating participant observation, website analysis, and qualitative interviews about the roles of NGOs, the outwardly positive practices can be interpreted to identify which motives best influence the public sphere to support a cause in commons preservation.

METHODS

Our research utilizes a three-pronged research approach which includes website analysis, participant observation, and qualitative interviews. Website analysis was used as a primary point of introduction with all organizations in this study. Organizations were identified through web searches for environmental organizations with particular focus on ocean health and global waste initiatives. Emphasis was placed on identifying civil society organizations including environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs). Initially, no distinction was made between organizational missions that ranged from policy to activism to education. The small sample size serves as a limitation for our fieldwork. However, this work is meant to be the opening of a discussion between various NGOs whose focus is on waste and ocean health.

NGOs provide opportunities for public participation through collective activities such as beach cleanups, general meetings, educational seminars, fundraising events, and outreach events. Ethnographic field notes were utilized to document participation in public organizational activities.

A website evaluation rubric was designed to evaluate the construction and content of environmental NGOs. The rubric evaluated mission statements for length, purpose, transparency, and methods. It also evaluated completed initiatives for focus on advocacy, mention of UN, and cooperation with government. The website evaluation rubric can be found in Appendix A.

In addition to the rubric for website analysis, we collected and analyzed published resources, documents, testimonials, marketing materials, and educational materials published online.

To expand upon the preliminary analysis of organization websites, we developed an interview protocol to elicit greater understanding of organizational structure, leadership, and focus on ocean

waste. We used semi-structured, open-ended questions, which were drawn from our previous findings gathered from participant observation and website analysis as well as our general research protocol that is grounded in a review of relevant environmental literature.

The protocol included an introductory question that clarified organizational commitment to ocean health. A question identified the organization’s role when it comes to ocean waste management. Other questions established how the organization identified itself in a local and global context. Moreover, our protocol utilizes retrospective questions about best practices, institutional challenges, organizational structure, leadership styles, and, finally, use of local, national, and international environmental guidelines within campaigns. An interview protocol with our list of questions can be found in Appendix B.

Recorded with Simple Recorder (OSX Application), interviews were conducted both in person and by telephone. Interview questions were provided via email prior to the interview. Interviews were then transcribed.

Preliminary analysis of organization websites provided answers to many interview questions in the protocol. The preliminary analysis also allowed for more flexibility to build upon existing knowledge regarding individual organizations. Although the structure of the interview protocol was designed to be comprehensive in nature, interviewees’ time constraints were considered to make the process less repetitive. In other words, we skipped certain interview questions where the answers were readily available on organization websites as well as questions that we deemed unnecessary or irrelevant based on preliminary background information on the organizations.

FINDINGS

Participant Observation

From our participant observation, we gathered ethnographic field notes that highlighted the motivations, perspectives, and opinions present at events held by NGOs.

During our first instance of participant observation at the Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center, we observed a strong focus on education, exhibited through its use of classrooms, provision of programs and educational opportunities for people of all ages, interactive exhibits with detailed explanations and insights, and also a plethora of available literature about the ocean. Complementing the education-based approach, the Sea Center prides itself upon advocacy and raising awareness about certain policies revolving ocean waste as well as the deteriorating current state of our oceans. They effectively communicated their message of how pollution is killing off a startling amount of sea creatures by strongly appealing to visitors’ emotional content with displays. One in particular displayed a preserved pregnant dolphin, which had died from toxic run-off poisoning.

Then, we travelled to Santa Monica Beach to attend a community beach clean up arranged by Heal the Bay. There we observed a great deal of dedicated volunteers and staff who were educated on the effects of plastic and trash that end up in the ocean from land-based activities. The staff members were also experts on effective methods to clean the beach through organizing task teams. We were placed in a task team where team leaders educated the group about the current situation of the ocean and advised us on what we can do to help stop ocean pollution. Not only did they focus on educating all that attended the beach clean up that day, they continuously reminded us that spreading word about the deteriorating state of the oceans after the event was essential for their ocean waste campaigns to be successful.

Next, we traveled to the Watershed Resource Center and listened in on an executive meeting held by the Surfrider Foundation. This meeting was centered around how the Surfrider Foundation can voice their advocacy to surrounding environmental NGOs and arrange an inter-NGO event that will bring together followers from all the organizations and campaign for the installment of cigarette disposal stations around the beaches. Aspects they discussed regarding the logistics of the event included funding, advertising, scheduling, and event objectives. Outwardly, the organization members discussed how certain event objectives would reflect their mission statement and where the funding would come from. One member suggested that they pool collected funds from all the participant organizations since this event has the potential to enact community-wide change if they successfully appeal to the state through their campaign. One team member specifically mentioned partnering with some environmental businesses and private sector organizations to gain more support. The chair of the

Santa Barbara Chapter of the Surfrider Foundation highlighted that businesses might have more power and influence over the state because they have ample capital to fund larger, more expansive endeavors. One other member mentioned that businesses face fewer restrictions and more opportunities to communicate with the government because they have sufficient accreditation that allows them to have a consultative status.

Website Analysis

For our second method of analysis, we evaluated seven NGO websites with a rubric that highlighted the organization’s mission statement (purpose, transparency, methods), completed initiatives (cooperation with government, focus, mention of the United Nations), organizational sphere of influence, and organizational focus.

In line with the field note data that we had collected, the websites displayed an overwhelming focus towards advocacy, education, and campaigning. Within the mission statements of five out of the seven organizations, there was an explicit mention of education and advocacy. The other two of the seven organizations contained implicit allusions to advocacy. Furthermore, mention of activism, education, communication, and advocacy were present in all the mission statements that appeared on the NGO websites.

With regards to the completed projects and initiatives present on the seven websites, none indicated any cooperation with the government or the United Nations. All listed projects had no mention of profit, but focused mainly on how they affected the audience, what policies they successfully campaigned for, what sites they have educated and/or cleaned up, and successful events such as beach clean ups and holidays that were established.

As we continued to evaluate the websites of the seven NGOs, we gathered information on the organizational focus (single-issue, coupled-issue, multiple-issue, open-issue, national-issue, international-issue). The overwhelming result was that no organization had a single-issue focus. Three organizations had a multiple-issue focus, two had a open-issue focus, one had a national-issue focus, and one identified itself as having an international-issue focus.

Qualitative Interviews

Our third approach to research involved interviewing local, national, and international organizations: Santa Barbara Museum of Natural History Sea Center: Marine Debris Prevention Program, Oceana, 5 Gyres, and Environmental Defense Center.

In our interview with the Sea Center, we confirmed the roles of NGOs with the Marine Debris Prevention Program coordinator. The MDPP exists as a national organization and tackles multiple issues that affect our nation’s seas, including the plastic pollution in the water and regulation of land-based run-off. She had stated that the work of her non-profit organization was heavily reliant on advocacy and education. With no cooperation with the government, state, businesses, or private sector organizations, the Marine Debris Prevention Program is staffed with educators who are specialists about the current situation of the ocean and what can be done to lessen the effects of pollution on marine life. The program coordinator pointed out that she did not pursue this responsibility out of desire for money. Rather, she highlighted her pure motivations and direct connections with nature from personal experiences. Additionally, she feels that the most effective methods for pushing policy change rely on appeal to emotional content. She felt that NGOs serve as advisors and important resources for expertise and civil perspective in international governing bodies, specifically the UN.

In my second interview courtesy of Oceana, which works as an international non-profit organization, we gathered more information about the roles of NGOs in global ocean governance. The assistant General Counsel member provided us with some insight about the unique organizational structure and campaigns that range from policy change and advocacy to binding authority. When we mentioned the methods used by the Marine Debris Prevention Program, he added that their main tool of influence relies on campaigning and educating the public about how to raise awareness. Through positively influencing communities to be more sustainably driven, Oceana successfully pushes change in ocean waste regulations. He also mentioned how protests to the government have also been a very persuasive method of swaying legislation. Oceana, in fact, does go to Congress and intervene with public affairs through mediums like media and research. The grassroots movements of Oceana use lobbying and keeping companies accountable as methods of campaigning. Oceana also uses

enforcement campaigns to raise awareness about certain laws governing private sector activities, such as dumping and emissions. When asked about how NGOs relate to businesses and private sector organizations, the assistant General Counsel member underscored how it was very difficult for NGOs to have a clear voice in government action because the government perceives NGOs to be less credible because they do not have as much money and seem to have single-issue focuses. Yet, contrary to what the government believes, he said that Oceana and the majority of NGOs have multiple-issue, national-issue, or international-issue focuses.

Next we interviewed, 5 Gyres, a national organization, through their environmental program director. She spoke about 5 Gyres' role in direct interaction with the public through organized events. She felt that creating a network amongst several environmental NGOs builds a stronger campaign in favor of pushing certain ocean policies that regulate dumping. She also made a strong effort to highlight the ocean governance expertise that 5 Gyres operates with. Along with the Marine Debris Prevention Program and Oceana, she specified the pure motivations behind their endeavors. In putting pressure on different companies, 5 Gyres also identifies their appeal to emotional content as an approach. When inquired about their perceived role within an intergovernmental organization like the UN, she mentioned that NGOs like 5 Gyres push the discussion towards a more specialized solution and provide a more transparent understanding of the consequences involved with ocean waste.

Furthermore, we contacted the Environmental Defense Center, a regional organization, through their Marine Conservation Program director. She established that the organization's approach to environmental change was through education, advocacy, and legal action. In terms of organizational structure, the Environmental Defense Center had a unique staff in that some were involved in the business/legal action methods and some were fully dedicated to advocacy and education. She described her organization as a pseudo-NGO because they do gain funds by charging clients that they represent in court. Yet, all of the clients are regional NGOs that require the business/legal action support that the Environmental Defense Center provides. She also mentioned the expertise and knowledge that each of the staff members holds for ocean waste governance. The director felt that NGOs need to hold more companies accountable for their actions. To have more of an influence on the government, the Environmental Defense Center creates a strong network with business and private sector organizations that have a clear connection with the government.

DISCUSSION

Complementing relevant literature regarding NGO influence within society, the research findings from our participant observation, website evaluation, and interviews clearly establish the roles and motivations of environmental NGOs within a global sphere of ocean waste governance. NGOs possess pure motivations, tackle multiple issues at once, utilize advocacy as their main tool in policy and outreach, and provide expertise and support surrounding ocean waste regulation.

From our research findings, we came to a conclusion that the motives of environmental NGOs reflect a genuine care for the environment and not a profit-focused approach. When the Marine Debris Prevention Program coordinator highlighted her love for nature and the personal offense she took from the ocean pollution, she illustrates her pure motivations and devotion to the ocean's well being. This mention of pure motivation came up in all the other four interviews as well. In terms of funding, from the website evaluation as well as through the interviews, none of the organizations receive any funds from the state or the government on any endeavors because all of them were privately funded through fundraisers and donations. Being funded privately implies that the organizations are not bound to the government in any way and do not have to fulfill tasks that would detach from their central mission. Also, to be a successful, privately funded organization like the ones that we had interviewed, the NGOs must have created a strong connection to the public and received support from civil society. This funding also confirms stakeholder devotion to organizational missions rather than profit. Inevitably, this type of connection allows for the views of the public to be fully reflected in the initiatives that the NGO undertakes. Moreover, when we attended the beach cleanup event in Santa Monica, all of the staff were volunteers and chose to help purely out of their own motivation to educate the community about the conservation and protection of our oceans. Not only does our fieldwork results emphasize the pure motivations of NGOs, it also demonstrates the transparency of organizations through organizational structure, funding, and initiatives. Egri & Herman (2000) state, “Nonprofit environmentalist organizations were highly receptive contexts for transformational leadership, whereas for-profit environmental organizations were at least moderately receptive in this

regard” (p. 571). Egri & Herman (2000) complement our work because they too have observed that NGOs are not bound by any business or motivation for profit, so their work can be receptive to the public and reflect the views of civil society.

Despite government opinions on the lack of credibility and initiative within the structure of civil society, NGOs prove to maintain an open, global perspective on campaigning for the resolution of multiple issues. The assistant General Counsel member of Oceana alluded to how governments and intergovernmental organizations like the UN “perceive [NGOs] as single issue interest groups who do not carry the credibility of a business.” However, he retorted by asserting that Oceana and other environmental NGOs have completed initiatives that span a wide range of issues (well being, clean water, sanitation, pollution, waste, conservation, etc.). Additionally, from our website evaluations, we observed that all of the completed campaigns spanned multiple-issue focuses. Organizations like Oceana flourish off of the public’s support and have received massive donations that aid in making their campaign even larger and wide ranging.

Unlike the formal enforcement (fines, subsidies, incentives, etc.) issued by governmental organizations to regulate ocean waste policies, NGOs effectively utilize advocacy and education as a softer approach to enforcement that appeals to people’s emotional content. From our participant observation of the Sea Center, education spilled from the exhibits and the highly trained staff and volunteers, further highlighting the presence of pure motivation. The detailed description of our relationship with the oceans present in the exhibits evoked a high emotional response that served as a revelation for the visitors about the deteriorating state of our oceans. An educational approach encourages the public to critically engage with the symbiotic relationship between people and the ocean. To complement this educational approach, events like the Heal the Bay beach cleanup we attended build upon the initial exposure to the reality of our oceans by providing effective methods on how the public can help clean the seas. The focus on education is evident throughout all functions of the organization, including the meetings. The executive meeting held by Surfrider highlighted the educational mindset of the organization because they wanted to set up the next event to call upon as much of the public to help campaign for a policy to have cigarette butt disposal bins put around the beaches. After analyzing the websites of the NGOs as a precursor to the qualitative interviews, we found that education and advocacy made up the methods of campaigning for certain policies to be passed. In addition, ENGOS use education and advocacy to raise awareness to the public about the oceans. Interestingly though, during the course of conducting our qualitative interviews, keeping companies accountable through documentation, legal action, and settlements was frequently mentioned as methods, but these were sometimes not listed on the organizations’ mission statements. Keeping companies accountable of their actions means reminding companies involved in ocean waste of policies that restrict their current activities. By bringing up the law to companies, the companies are more inclined to comply with the recommendations made by ENGOS because they fear getting sued and punished. Not placing legal action on mission statements indicates that ENGOS consider this method to be a last resort and would rather not turn in the companies to the court. The ENGOS would much rather reach settlements and agreements with the companies because they place more emphasis on education and advocacy. Additionally, Szarka (2013) mentions that “a politics of accountability” allows “the attribution of responsibility [to pave] the way for making political demands” (p. 12). This quote supports that accountability can be a powerful tool in pushing policy changes because it appeals to legislation’s sense of responsibility over the ocean’s pollution.

Because of the specialized staff and the research-based focus in NGOs, NGOs provide necessary expert advice on new ocean governing policies and give a civil perspective on what actions should be implemented. During the executive meeting held by Surfrider, the staff members showcased their complete understanding about specific actions needed to implement the necessary policies to clean up the ocean. Being able to pinpoint that cigarette butts are slowly becoming a waste menace wrecking the coasts demonstrates that the staff of researchers, directors, coordinators, etc. specialize in work related to ocean regulation. The input that many of the staff members gave in the meeting would provide much needed expertise if presented to a larger body of governance like the United Nations or even a smaller division, like the UNEP or UNDP. Moreover, in our interviews with all of the organizations, each of the interviewees highlighted the capabilities of their staff and representatives to educate and advise governments on an international scale, which proves the motivation towards more involvement within larger spheres of influence like the United Nations.

CONCLUSION

NGOs need to be part of how decisions are made within the United Nations. From our discussion, we can see that NGOs exist as a great resource for governments and intergovernmental organizations like the United Nations. After conducting research through participant observation, website analysis, and qualitative interviews, we concluded that ENGOs have pure motivations, undertake multiple issues at once, mainly use advocacy in policy and outreach, and provide expertise and specialized support surrounding ocean waste regulation.

Looking forward, recommendations for application of this research would be to encourage the United Nations to recruit more NGO representatives within their governing bodies, UNEP and UNDP in particular. The government wrongly overlooks the innate credibility of environmental NGOs. Yet, with regards to ocean waste regulation, NGOs command an air of respect due to their highly educated representatives, open approach to advocacy and campaigning, and their civil transparency. Providing a pure reflection of the public's views over ocean waste and pollution, environmental NGOs add a necessary perspective in the policy-making process. Placing representatives as advisors in high level meetings, sending coalitions of NGO staff to conventions and outreach programs, and allocating more funds to establishing governing bodies that include NGOs all serve as primary actions that the United Nations can take to involve environmental NGOs more.

FUTURE WORK

Avenues for future research involve the study of organizational theory and how intergovernmental organizations can allocate state responsibilities to the Global Commons. Furthermore, increasing the sample size of our research by conducting more participant observation, website analysis, and qualitative interviews. Conducting a case study of pseudo-NGOs can also provide more insight about how the flexible enforcement capabilities of civil society can be applied to global governance.

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Jason Kong is a high-school senior currently attending Milton Academy in Milton, MA, USA. As the head of his institution’s sustainability board, he has spearheaded an environmentally oriented mindset within his institution’s community through performing initiatives such as implementing school-wide waste regulation rules, establishing composting within buildings, harnessing solar energy, and conserving energy and water through eco-friendly washrooms and lighting. To pursue his passion in environmental policy and advocacy, he conducted intensive humanities-based research under mentors Dr. Jenny Cook-Gumperz and Sara A. Cooley, MA as part of the prestigious Research Mentorship Program at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

APPENDIX

Website Evaluation Rubric

Mention of cooperation or intervention with government

Yes	No

Mission Statement

Length	Purpose	Transparency	Method

Completed Initiatives

Purpose	Cooperation with Government	Focus on Advocacy	Mention of UN

Organizational Sphere of Influence

Local	National with Local Chapters	Local	National	International with National Chapters	International

Organizational Focus

Single	Multiple	Open	Coupled	National	International

Interview Questions

Organizational Specific Activities

- What role does your organization play in advocating for global ocean health?
- Please describe the educational mission of your organization.
- How does activism and community involvement support your organizational mission?
- Can you provide us with a basic description of your organizational structure and leadership?

Local to Global Approach

- Are you affiliated with any other networks of environmental organizations?
- How do you make use of state or federal laws in your organizational activities?
- Do you receive any state or federal funding?
- Do you feel like the EPA and government regulation are doing enough to improve the ocean waste crises?

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- How familiar are you with global treaties, laws, policies, etc. that have to do with regulating ocean waste?
- Do you feel being more informed on global policies would strengthen your mission statements and or action plans?
- Do you ever incorporate SDGs or international agreements such as the Kyoto Protocol or Basel Convention in your organizational activities?
- From your perspective, what should be the role of NGOs/NPOs be in local and global policy?
- The world’s oceans are part of a global commons. What is your opinion about international law and enforcement of waste disposal in the world’s oceans?
- NGOs/NPOs often rely on “soft power” and public opinion in the enforcement of local and/or international treaties. How would you describe your ideal level of influence in the creation, monitoring, and enforcement of local and/or international law?
- How effective is social media use in influencing opinion surrounding environmental policy? Which platform do you use the most? How often do you use it? Do you link to it on your organization’s website?