

Statement by Daryl J. Boness
Nominee for Chairman, Marine Mammal Commission
before the
U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation
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Chairman Rockefeller, Ranking Member Hutchinson, and distinguished members of the Committee, I am honored to be here before you as President Obama's nominee for Chairman of the Marine Mammal Commission. As a relatively naïve high school student in the midst of dairy farming and paper mill country, I never could have predicted being given the opportunity to serve in such a capacity. Marine mammals and the oceans they inhabit only existed in pictures for me. It is truly a privilege and I thank the President, and I thank you.

So, how did I get from there to here? I reached this point today because my family, mentors, and friends have given me unfailing encouragement to pursue new challenges. I have been blessed especially by the support of my parents, siblings, in-laws, and particularly my wife, Leslie, and daughter, Melissa. I grew up in a large family in central Wisconsin where my father worked in a paper mill. He taught me to respect our environment and natural resources, which in Wisconsin meant forests, fields, rivers, and lakes. He also taught me to hunt and fish as a means for putting food on the table. In those early years I did not reflect much on the wonder of those resources, or think about the fact that they would not be endless if managed in an unsustainable manner.

My world expanded in high school, when I took advanced biology and was introduced to the challenge of not only reading about science but actually participating in it. The ideas and processes involved in discovering new information and resolving questions through research broadened my horizons. In college my advisor recognized my enthusiasm for science, provided me opportunities for independent research, and encouraged me to present my work at professional meetings and to publish my results. I would like to acknowledge Dr. Neil Wylie for that incredibly important encouragement and guidance during those critical years of my education and training. I did indeed become a research scientist.

It was also during college that Leslie provided my first opportunity to see an ocean, the Atlantic, in Rockport, Massachusetts, not far from where she grew up. Although I don't remember seals from that snowy winter day, the ocean vista left a lasting impression of a world extending beyond my gaze, now open to me. I realize that my experiences as a teenager and a student gave me a deeper appreciation of our natural resources and the environment in which we live. I began noticing the clumps of foam and debris in the rivers and lakes I used to fish and seeing the black sidewalks covered in soot from the local foundry. These things were not new; I was just becoming more aware of them. The quality of the environment was not a strong concern in central Wisconsin in those days. However, from the time this august body passed the Marine Mammal Protection Act, the Endangered Species Act, and a whole suite of environmental legislation in the late 1960s and early 1970s, we have begun to see the great value in, and need for, conservation of our bountiful, but not endless, resources.

In graduate school I studied the behavioral ecology of seals in the North Atlantic, my first foray into marine mammal science. While presenting my research at a conference, I met a Smithsonian scientist and learned that the National Zoological Park had an opening for a seal biologist. I applied, had the good fortune of getting the job, and began a career path that has led me to this position before you.

At the Smithsonian National Zoo I began as a curator responsible for some mammal exhibits, including those involving seals and sea lions. I was also expected to conduct a research program on these seal species. It was at this point that I began to recognize the importance of communicating the results of my studies to a broader audience, not just my colleagues and peers in science. I later held a full-time research position at the Zoo and expanded my research program. In this position as well, the Smithsonian strongly encouraged me to disseminate the results of my studies to a wide audience, and I share the Institution's conviction that science must be integrated into the many facets of our society.

My early studies focused on the basic biology and ecology of several seal species with the aim of advancing biological theories. However, colleagues from the Smithsonian and elsewhere convinced me that such research is also vitally important for conservation, as is applied research.

For me this increased awareness coincided, in the mid-1990s, with being appointed to the Marine Mammal Commission's Committee of Scientific Advisors on Marine Mammals.

As a member, and then Chairman, of that Committee I believe that I have made valuable contributions to promote marine mammal research and conservation. I also have learned a great deal about the complex challenges involved. Indeed, although we continue to increase our scientific knowledge, marine mammals and our marine ecosystems are facing new, emerging threats, and the challenges of conservation are becoming even more complex and difficult.

The Marine Mammal Protection Act has had a profound effect on the conservation of marine mammals and, indeed, marine ecosystems. Yet, as human populations have grown so, too, have our interactions with marine mammals, whether we are trying to make a living or simply enjoy the marine environment through recreation. Resolving the conflicts that arise will not be easy, but we must find workable solutions. We have already seen the extinction of two marine mammal species in my lifetime, the Caribbean monk seal and the Yangtze River dolphin. Several other marine mammal species are perilously close to extinction, including the North Atlantic and North Pacific right whales, the vaquita (a porpoise found only in the Gulf of California), and the Mediterranean and Hawaiian monk seals, all of which number in the hundreds.

In the face of such conservation challenges, I place a high value not only on improving our scientific knowledge, but also on fostering openness, fairness, and objectivity in applying that science to achieve sustainable solutions. I believe these latter traits explain, in part, why I was asked to serve as editor of the leading scientific journal devoted to marine mammals and to serve multiple terms as a Scientific Advisor to the Marine Mammal Commission.

The President's request that I now serve as Chairman of the Marine Mammal Commission is a great honor and privilege. If I am confirmed, the position will be a challenge but also an opportunity to help shape policies that will further the conservation of marine mammals and the ecosystems of which they are a part. Work with marine mammals has been a central focus throughout much of my life, and I believe that I have the necessary experience and motivation to guide the Commission as it fulfills its important mission. I have the utmost respect for the current

members of the Marine Mammal Commission and its staff and the scientists and managers of the institutions and agencies that the Commission advises and oversees. Should I be confirmed, I welcome the chance to work cooperatively and productively with these agencies to further the goals of the Marine Mammal Protection Act.