

Bio – Kristina Gjerde

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Kristina Gjerde is high seas policy advisor for the IUCN Global Marine Program. Since late 2008, she has also been working with Census scientists and others to establish the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative. She lives in Poland with her husband and son, but she enjoys every opportunity to dive into the ocean that is so much a part of her life.

The Census of Marine Life ... has given the ocean a face and marine wildlife an address.

- Kristina Gjerde

“As a little girl, I loved dashing into the ocean. I was entranced by its power and majesty. However, only during my first scuba dive as an adult did I see that below the mighty waves dwelt fragile, vulnerable creatures. This observation inspired me to change the course of my career, from a maritime lawyer defending oil and shipping companies to an environmental lawyer defending coral reefs.

I was lucky to get a two-year fellowship at the Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, which I used to help negotiate a new treaty to protect coral reefs near Caribbean shores, and later worked with WWF to reduce shipping impacts on reefs globally. Then in 2001, at a workshop on high seas protection hosted by the German and Australian governments, I was amazed to discover that coral reefs also existed in deep ocean waters and that they were as vulnerable to human impacts as those close to the surface. Yet no one knew how to locate these cold-water corals other than by trawling them off the bottom. I also found that no one had a clue how to protect highly migratory species such as whales or tuna once they traveled outside national waters because they were always on the move – like stateless citizens. To make matters worse, some lawyers in the room claimed you could not legally protect large areas of ocean space beyond national boundaries. Soon after, I set my sights on working with scientists and others to find a way to protect these little studied but vulnerable habitats and species in the remote ocean.

I am excited to report that the decade's worth of discoveries catalyzed by the [Census of Marine Life](#) now provides the scientific foundation for us to move forward on high seas protected areas. Begun in 2000, the Census's effort to map and record all the marine species that did, do, and will live in the ocean has given the ocean a face and marine wildlife an address. This address is an essential building block for protecting places and improving management, as we need to know where these species live and travel to in order to designate areas within which they can thrive.

To translate this new information to policymakers, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Census of Marine Life are now officially launching the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative, which I have been facilitating with support from the German Federal Agency for Nature Conservation. Together with a large and growing number of partners, our goal is to assist governments and managers to identify important habitats and biodiversity hotspots in the open ocean and deep sea, with a current focus on the most remote areas beyond national jurisdiction.

The good news is that these areas are no longer so remote. For example, we know now the location and range of 22 species of large marine animals in the Pacific and can track their daily progress online. We found out that elephant seals, which we thought were confined to California's coastal waters, actually swim halfway across the Pacific to find highly productive areas to feed. We have located the favored high seas hangout for great white sharks that some scientists have called the "White Shark Café." In the deep sea, we can now predict the presence of corals on seamounts around the world through sophisticated modeling techniques.

Discoveries like these enable managers to take rational measures to reduce the footprint of human activities on marine wildlife and ecosystems. Indeed, the results of the Census have already spurred the United Nations to protect cold-water corals from high seas bottom trawling. In addition, Census science has underpinned the establishment of the first wholly high seas marine protected area (MPA) in the Southern Ocean, near the South Orkney Islands, and agreement that a high seas MPA along the mid-Atlantic ridge of the Northeast Atlantic is needed.

We have also made progress on the legal side. Governments have welcomed the new data, tools and technologies compiled by the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative. In fact, early this month, government representatives (including those from nations that in 2001 thought it could not be done) gathered at the United Nations in New York specifically to discuss practical ways to protect more of these special places on the high seas.

But we still need to find ways to encourage States and organizations responsible for managing activities such as fishing, shipping and seabed mining to make conservation a priority and to cooperate to protect specific areas. The Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative will continue to build the scientific base, but we – by which I mean all those interested in conservation and sustainable use of the global ocean commons – still need to call for the cooperation necessary to protect these special places and to improve management throughout this vast, previously little-known realm. For more information about the Global Ocean Biodiversity Initiative, please see our new brochure posted on-line at www.GOBI.org. “