

Proposal for the 2022 ASANOR Conference (American Studies Association of Norway)

Appalling Ocean, Verdant Land: America and the Sea

Submitted by:

Dr. Gary E. Weir
Historian and Guest Investigator
Marine Policy Center
Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution

Category: War/Military Engagement

Title:

*Defined by the Ocean:
American Naval Officers, Scientists, and the reshaping of maritime conflict*

After World War I the interests of ocean scientists and American naval officers converged dramatically to produce a professional relationship of immense consequence to both the national defense and our understanding of the world ocean. This powerful relationship laid the foundation for long-range ocean communication, modern submarine warfare, popular and compelling ocean exploration, and the formation of oceanography as a discrete discipline. However, as the century opened, it seemed unlikely that the strictly hierarchical, warfighting world of the naval officer would regularly intersect with the ocean scientist's theory, university laboratories, and devotion to freedom of inquiry. In the United States, from 1914, this intersection did occur, more completely than either culture ever expected. Necessity, not natural inclination, gave birth to the productive dialogue that emerged from this encounter. Both cultures needed to understand the ocean, a need that took the US Navy far beyond surface battles and imperial support. As it happened, neither culture could satisfy its most fundamental purpose without the other.

The world ocean defined both communities. Without the ocean, words like navy and oceanography have no meaning. The water covering seventy percent of the Earth's surface has always given life to these terms and governed their cultural context. This presentation will focus on the compelling motives and carefully engineered means that brought American scientists and naval officers together in a unique joint-effort to understand the ocean environment. Obligated to work in concert at first by war and then by interwar economic adversity, civilian science and the American naval community overcame near incommensurability to achieve an understanding of the ocean that reshaped the American concept of naval warfare and national defense. We need to explore the depth and nature of this dialogue if we are to understand the extraordinary effect of the ocean on the American experience.

Dr. Gary E. Weir

Brief Professional Biography

Affiliation:

Guest Investigator, Marine Policy Center, Woods Hole Oceanographic Institution, 1993 – Present

Chief Historian, Emeritus, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, 2006 - 2020; Retired, January 2020

Sample Achievement in ocean history:

Creator and convener of the Matthew F. Maury Workshop series on the History of Oceanography, June 1997 and later.

Distinguished Civilian Service Medal, National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency, 2020.

Published Research and Publication Sample:

2001. *An Ocean in Common: American Naval Officers, Scientists, and the Ocean Environment* (Texas A&M University Press).