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Ocean Pollution and the Fishing Industry

Climate change is a preeminent topic that will be focused on in the 2020 presidential debate. Specifically, animal agriculture is surpassing other environmental threats. Globally, animal agriculture is responsible for more greenhouse gases than all the world's transportation systems combined ("Meat and the Environment"). A major industry that is directly responsible for much of the ocean pollution is the commercial fishing industry. "Commercial fishing is cruelty to animals on a colossal scale, killing hundreds of billions of animals worldwide every year—far more than any other industry" ("Commercial Fishing"). Current regulation of the fishing industry is not strict enough to maintain sustainable levels of fishing that will preserve ocean environments for the future. Moreover, the current Administration has weakened ocean regulations (Wei-Haas), the opposite direction of what is needed to preserve the oceans. Major advances in ocean pollution regulations and fishing industry regulations must be made to ensure the environmental health of the oceans for future generations.

A hot topic in the discussion of ocean environments is the Great Pacific Garbage Patch - the world's largest collection of floating trash (Parker). "It lies between Hawaii and California and is often described as "larger than Texas" (Parker). Coming into 2020, the actual composition of the garbage patch is being brought into the discussion. "Microplastics make up 94 percent of an estimated 1.8 trillion pieces of plastic in the patch. But that only amounts to

eight percent of the total tonnage” (Parker). In actuality, “of the 79,000 metric tons of plastic in the patch, most of it is abandoned fishing gear” (Parker). This revelation is crucial for the upcoming political debates because it shifts the focus of previous ocean pollution theories. In the past, political focus has been on water bottle and plastic bag bans or switching to recyclable packaging. With this new data, though, environmental legislature in 2020 must switch its plan of attack. While targeting common plastic is still important, new legislature must be added in 2020 to regulate the fishing industry.

This new data was acquired from researchers under Boyan Slat, head of the Ocean Cleanup organization. Their study revealed that “fishing nets account for 46 percent of the trash, with the majority of the rest composed of other fishing industry gear, including ropes, oyster spacers, eel traps, crates, and baskets” (Parker). This percentage is far above the globally accepted ranges for marine debris, 20 percent from fishing sources and 80 percent from land (Parker). Therefore, nearly half of the ocean pollution in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch is from the fishing industry alone, a terrifying statistic that warrants immediate political action.

Unfortunately, the climate plans set by the current 2020 presidential candidates have a severe lack of focus on the fishing industry or on ocean pollution as a whole. Of the 21 candidates running, only four even mention ocean pollution (“Climate Change and the 2020 Presidential Candidates”). Senator Michael Bennet stated that he would work to “conserve 30% of America’s land and oceans by 2030” (“Climate Change and the 2020 Presidential Candidates”). Senator Cory Booker focused on his plan to “unleash natural climate solutions through massive reforestation and coastal wetlands restoration” (“Climate Change and the 2020 Presidential Candidates”). Senator Elizabeth Warren did not explicitly mention ocean pollution,

but she has a strong focus on water pollution, with a plan to “reinstitute the clean water rule to protect our lakes, rivers, and streams, and the drinking water they provide” (“Climate Change and the 2020 Presidential Candidates”). Finally, Senator Kamala Harris focused on the damage done by rising sea levels, as she “introduced the “Living Shorelines Act of 2018,” which would have directed the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to make grants to communities to combat the impacts of sea-level rise and stronger storms” (“Climate Change and the 2020 Presidential Candidates”). No candidate has set an explicit plan for regulation of the fishing industry, a crucial task that will hopefully be tackled in the upcoming debates.

Political headlines are in need of a shift from commercial plastics to regulating the fishing industry, a change that will hopefully be reflected in the 2020 presidential debates. “The interesting piece is that at least half of what they’re finding is not consumer plastics, which are central to much of the current debate, but fishing gear,” says George Leonard, the chief scientist at the Ocean Conservancy” (Parker). Today’s headlines are filled with plastic straw elimination campaigns - well intentioned but overall ineffective. In reality, plastic straws contribute “less than 1 percent of the plastic waste” (Prater) in the ocean. While eliminating consumer plastics is certainly useful, there are much larger threats to ocean environments. The 2020 presidential debates must address legislature to regulate the waste production of the fishing industry to work to preserve the oceans.

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