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Social and institutional challenges in species and ecosystem conservation: an appraisal of the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission

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Abstract In the pantheon of U.S. environmental law, only one federal statute—the Marine Mammal Protection Act of 1972—has created an independent oversight agency with explicit authority to conduct appraisals of and make recommendations on all regulatory agency actions under the law. That agency, the U.S. Marine Mammal Commission, is the subject of our analysis. Using a semi-structured survey and participant observation, we assess the commission's operations under its legislative mandate, using criteria from the literature on policy-oriented professionalism. Our findings indicate a dichotomy between the Commission's oversight of other agencies' marine mammal programs and the manner in which it self-evaluates, learns, and evolves on the basis of its experience, with strongly pragmatic approaches to its appraisal of other agencies' programs, contrasted with weak appraisal of its own operations.

Keywords Marine Mammal Commission - Marine Mammal Protection Act - Policy-oriented professionalism - Pragmatism - Problem orientation - Regulatory agencies