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ENVIRONMENT

## Slow-Motion Disaster Below the Waves

November 17, 2002 | Randy Olson | Randy Olson is a filmmaker and faculty member in marine biology at USC.

There is a new term in the environmental movement. It sounds esoteric, like the kind of thing you don't really need to understand, something you can leave to the more technical types.

The term is "shifting baselines," and you do need to know it, because shifting baselines affect the quality-of-life decisions you face daily. Shifting baselines are the chronic, slow, hard-to-notice changes in things, from the disappearance of birds and frogs in the countryside to the increased drive time from L.A. to San Diego. If your ideal weight used to be 150 pounds and now it's 160, your baseline -- as well as your waistline -- has shifted.

The term was coined by fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly in 1995. It was a term we'd apparently been needing, because it quickly spread to a variety of disciplines. It's been applied to analysis of everything from deteriorating cities to declining quality of entertainment.

Among environmentalists, a baseline is an important reference point for measuring the health of ecosystems. It provides information against which to evaluate change. It's how things used to be. It is the tall grass prairies filled with buffalo, the swamps of Florida teeming with bird life and the rivers of the Northwest packed with salmon. In an ideal world, the baseline for any given habitat would be what was there before humans had much impact.

Link: <http://articles.latimes.com/2002/nov/17/opinion/op-olson17>