in New England. Until the early 1970s it was a conventional department emphasizing physical and regional geography with few opportunities to concentrate on systematic field such as quantitative methods, computer graphics, and other areas which now characterize the discipline.

As often happens, innovation and experimentation become the responsibility of one or two people who perceive opportunities where others do not. At URI it was the professional interest of one individual who set into motion the forces which resulted in the current metamorphosed department. Lewis Alexander who was then chairing the department, was one of a handful of U.S. geographers who developed an early interest in the oceans, stimulated no doubt by the already protracted United Nations-sponsored Law of the Sea negotiations. Professor Alexander was instrumental in developing the annual Law of the Sea Institute. This two week Kingston event brought together many of the key players in the Law of Sea negotiations. Others who routinely participated in the seminar included many from the private, institutional and public sectors.

The second departmental initiative which was taken during the mid 1960s was the development of an interdisciplinary Master of Marine Affairs degree. This nine month program was stimulated by the demand, particularly on the federal level, for professionals who could help formulate and implement the nation’s Coastal Zone Management Program which was then in its infancy.

During the first few years, the M.M.A. program was “floating” in the sense that it depended on faculty from many different departments. Besides the Department of Geography which administered it and whose faculty were especially involved, students were required or encouraged to take courses in resource economics, oceanography, community planning and political science. From the onset, this degree was in many ways unique as were the students who went through it. The entrance requirements were quite demanding. Matriculating students were to have either five years experience in a marine related field or another advanced degree. During the nearly 20 years the program has been in existence, a wide range of professional backgrounds and academic degrees have been represented among our matriculating students. These range from fishing men (and women) to lawyers, medical doctors, and a host of physical scientists many of whom have become disillusioned by the scarce employment opportunities in the respective natural sciences.

As the first program of its kind, it fulfilled a demand which has hardly diminished since but because of the rather strict matriculation requirements, many otherwise well qualified students could not be serviced. Consequently, in 1978 four related developments took place which further established Marine Affairs as an academic program at the University.

First, several existing faculty positions became available which provided a unique opportunity for department reorientation and redirection. Secondly, some of the faculty saw an opportunity to develop a traditional Master’s degree in Marine Affairs. This thesis program was intended to attract recent, well qualified graduates without prior extensive experience in marine affairs and in many ways modeled after more conventional social science Master’s degrees. For a variety of reasons this degree had undergone a slow but persistent decline. Consequently, in part to offer undergraduate students opportunities to combine Geography and Marine Affairs, an option in Marine Environmental Policy passed through the extensive University governance system during the late 1970s. Finally, the department’s formal association
West

Geography in New England

with Marine Affairs was recognized in the mid 1970s when the name was officially changed to the Department of Geography and Marine Affairs.

At the present time neither the Master's nor the undergraduate program in geography is active. The last Geography MA student was graduated more than five years ago. Upon completion of his M.A. in Geography this student decided to enroll in the department's M.M.A. program.

In the early 1980s we have had between 45 and 65 active graduate students enrolled each year. This figure includes only those who are currently taking courses or are finishing their major papers or theses. As such, we are in the enviable position of having one of the highest graduate student/faculty ratios in the College of Arts and Sciences. At URI, this College comprises about half the University in terms of faculty and students.

Perhaps more importantly, graduates from either program have had relatively little difficulty in obtaining employment within the broad area of marine affairs. This latter phenomenon requires some explanation and relates to the manner in which the department has structured itself.

The research and teaching interest of the seven faculty can be broken down into four not necessarily mutually exclusive categories. The first defines the environmental interest (coastal versus offshore) of the faculty while the second is influenced by the preferred conceptual approach (policy/law vs. management). Since policy/law involves both coastal and marine resources, the departmental course offerings and the research interests of both faculty and students do tend to fall within one of the four overlapping groups. In this context, geography permeates the course offerings, although most of the students were attracted to the program not because of its geographical aspects but because of the evolving coastal and marine policy on both the state and federal levels.

The relatively strong employment prospects also require some discussion, if only because we believe they have contributed fairly significantly to the national and even international reputation of the department and the high rate of matriculation. During the early 1970s, most of the employment opportunities were in the federal government. Since then, three developments have taken place which have enhanced employment prospects for our graduates. The first has been an increase in state positions as the participating coastal states have begun to plan and implement federally mandated coastal zone programs. The second factor which has stimulated growth in marine affairs employment has occurred within the private sector and has involved a wide range of industries operating within the coastal zone and/or utilizing coastal and offshore resources. The third factor which has influenced employment prospects, for our graduates at least, is related to the age of the program and the previously mentioned high reputation we have been able to develop. Many of our earlier graduates have advanced in their own careers to the point where they are now in positions to fill entry and mid-level management positions. Our department had been fortunate in being able to recommend many of our recent URI graduates for these openings. Important alumni clusters exist in Washington, DC, South Carolina, and California with smaller clusters in Alaska, Florida and New York.

The success of the department in some respects has been costly and this story is not complete without at least passing reference to those costs. Throughout its long existence our discipline has contributed to and in some instances given rise to other disciplines. Mathematics, planning, ecology are but a few which in part owe their origin to geography. Our discipline is unlike every other profession with the exception of philosophy and mathematics in that it is not identified by a specific subject matter but by its research approach. Geographers are unique in the sense that they apply spatial principles to a host of locational phenomena.

In North America public recognition of geography is generally related to the tangible (applied) contributions which the discipline has made to society. It is therefore not surprising that geographers have been excellent synthesizers, coordinators and lately, environmental managers. In the context of the coastal and marine environment, geography has come full circle in a short 20 or 30 years. During the 1960s, most of us who decided on becoming geographers were taught systematic as opposed to regional geography. A few of us who have become involved with the coastal and marine environment have in some way come full circle. Trained as systematic geographers with expertise in statistics, cartography, political and economic geography, we are now forced to deal with these problems in the context of a spatial unit -- in this case marine environment. While our Marine Affairs students may not realize it, their reputation and success in large part is influenced by the way they have been trained to analyze and resolve socio-environmental problems and opportunities. Our dilemma which has neither been resolved within our department nor the discipline as a whole relates to the simplistic image which most have of our discipline as a whole including some of those who stand to benefit the most.