Reference points are specific values related to the state of a resource to which targets and limits for harvest management can be set. Although reference points evolved within fisheries science, they are likely to be widely applicable across a range of ecosystems and environments, as the principles behind their development and implementation apply to any harvested system. This special issue of *Environmental Conservation* takes a critical look at the ways in which reference points have been used previously, including the political, scientific and management contexts that have hindered and enabled their implementation. Through these experiences, a range of recommendations are made, highlighting the importance of social context in which biological reference points are developed and in favour of approaches that deal explicitly with uncertainty. When implemented without qualification, reference points have proven effective at preventing fisheries collapse and rebuilding depleted stocks; where they have not, management failures have occurred. Given the social-ecological complexity of fisheries management, the papers in this special issue provide a strong argument for the application of reference points across a range of resource management problems.