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Stop overfishing or fishing will be over

By Simon Cripps

In a new campaign, WWF urges the European Union (EU) to radically reform its fisheries policy. The campaign coincides with this year's review by the EU of its Common Fisheries Policy (CFP), the first opportunity to fundamentally change the CFP for ten years.

Fishing is a form of hunting that is heavily subsidized by the taxpayer – to the tune of 1.4 billion Euros a year in Europe alone. Not that the skill of the hunt comes into it in these high tech days. Sonar fish finders, spotter planes, satellite communications and massive nets give the fish no chance to avoid capture. And it is precisely the industrial scale of today's fishing that has caused the problem. Catches have gone up and fish stocks are going down. Increasingly we are eating juvenile fish because the adults have already been caught – so fish populations don't get a chance to breed and replenish.



Emptying the codend on the deck of beam trawler
Liliane Jil © WWF-Canon/Quentin BATES

At least sixty per cent of the world's most valuable fish species are either overfished or fished to the limit. WWF's Living Planet Report 2000 revealed that humans consume thirty per cent more fish than the oceans can sustainably produce. In 1992 the world's richest fishery – the Grand Banks off the coast of Newfoundland – collapsed and has not reopened. The unthinkable has happened – that seemingly inexhaustible supply of cod was overexploited to the point of commercial extinction. In Europe the 'total allowable catches' for fishers have been slashed in recent years – yet in many cases fishers cannot even find enough fish to match their 'quota'.



Oceanic or Deepwater Redfish (*Sebastes mentella*), caught in a trawler mesh © WWF-Canon/Quentin BATES

It is now recognized that overfishing is one of the main causes of damage to the ocean environment. By upsetting the balance of marine ecosystems overfishing actually reduces the capacity of our oceans to cope with other problems such as pollution and toxic algal blooms.

Fishing is trapped in a destructive cycle. Taxpayer subsidies support more boats than are commercially viable: resulting in too few fish - which in turn drives the boats to fish more and causes immense damage to the ocean environment, which forces fishermen to go further afield to fish, for which more subsidies are paid. It is a cycle that will ultimately destroy the fishing industry, the fish stocks and the marine environment.

This is particularly evident in Europe. Europe has overfished its own waters, largely

because European and national subsidies have promoted too much fishing capacity. So the European Union has increasingly turned to buying up fishing rights in developing countries – such as in Senegal and Mauritania in West Africa. Yet, with booming populations and an increasing concentration of people on the coast, these countries and their people also rely on fishing for food and jobs.

European fleets are also turning their attention to the ocean depths – once considered insufficiently rich in life and too difficult to fish. For example, scientists predict that orange roughy – a species known to live up to 90 years and have a slow reproducing rate – cannot survive commercial fishing. Yet, orange roughy is regularly served in Europe.

But why is WWF launching its fisheries campaign this year? The answer is simple. In 2002 the European Union, the region with the largest per capita consumption of fish in the world, is reviewing its fisheries policy. This year the future of our oceans will be determined, at least in large measure, by fifteen people: the Fisheries Ministers of the fifteen nations that make up the European Union.

WWF has a clear message for those EU Ministers: stop overfishing or fishing will be over. In previous years these Ministers, or their predecessors, have preferred to put short-term interests above scientific advice. Choosing short-term strategies to gain popularity and maximize catches has been an easier option than giving the fishing industry and the communities that depend on fish, a long-term sustainable future. Europe's fishers and fishing communities deserve better.

The European commission has published a 'Green Paper' on the future of the Common Fisheries Policy that paints a very bleak picture of the state of fish stocks and the over-capacity of the European fishing fleet. Some powerful Governments – such as Germany and the UK – support the Commission's view that Europe fisheries policy is unsustainable and must be radically reformed. While there is opposition to reform, no one has seriously challenged the European Commission's assessment of the problems facing the fishing industry.

So how should the European Union's fisheries policy be changed? WWF proposes four major reforms:

1. Eliminate over capacity of the EU fishing fleet, with a 40 % reduction in the next 5 years.
2. Reform and reduce environmentally harmful subsidies, through changed spending patterns that support the transition to a long-term sustainable fishing sector.
3. Reduce the global footprint of the European Union by ensuring fair and sustainable fisheries access agreements with developing nations that respect the needs of local people and adhere to international agreements.
4. Adopt measures to protect the marine environment that minimize the effects of fishing activities and secure the viability of all marine habitats and species.

The thrill of hunting the world's last wild commercial species -- its marine fisheries -- is over. The challenge now is for the EU Fisheries Ministers to create a responsible framework for managing the use of this valuable resource given all of the new technology and implications for the marine environment. Reforming the Common Fisheries Policy in the coming months is only a start.

(855 words)

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