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Wild fish in danger zone - overfishing must stop

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Canadian researchers Reg Watson and Daniel Pauly from the University of Vancouver, and the Norwegian Member of Parliament Ivar Kristiansen have recently given a strong warning to governments world-wide that fish stock are being depleted and could be halved by 2015, unless action is taken... fast.

The Canadian researchers have arrived at figures showing that the total catch of wild fish has gone down by 360,000 tonnes every year since 1988, and they firmly believe that the global fish stocks will have been halved by the year 2015.

"If the combined governments of the world do not call for an immediate halt to the depletion of stocks, there is little chance that the seas and oceans of the world can supply the needs of future generations," claim the two researchers.

The report issued by the two Canadians has created a stir internationally, and has been the subject of comment in the magazines Nature and The Economist as well as the UK newspaper The Independent. The Economist writes that Watson and Pauly have given the world an important warning.

Of Politics
The work of the two Canadian researchers had its basis in the fact that a number of local fishing areas around the world broke down simultaneously while at the same time the individual fishery nations reported figures that showed that annual catches were slowly and steadily increasing. This provided the spur for the researchers to produce a global chart showing the difference between the researchers' estimated catches and official statistics.

One example of the estimated catch and the uncertainty reflected in official statistics is China, where it was first estimated that the catch in 1999 would be 5.5 million tonnes. But instead the official figures for that year showed that the actual total catch was 10.1 million tonnes. When the researchers rectified the official estimated figures, the figures showed that the world's fishery resources hadn't increased in recent years but had in fact been reduced.

At the same time that this important report is making its entry into the public arena, we can see that moves are being made on the political front. Stortingets næringskomité (The Norwegian Parliamentary Committee for Trade) is scathing in its criticism of the administration of the fisheries. Ivar Kristiansen has been the Committee's spokesman for a report on the fisheries agreements Norway has signed with other nations. He believes he has sound reason to claim that the Norwegian authorities have - in common with other nations - failed to establish a sustainable administration of fish resources.

Kristiansen is unequivocal in his belief that no further documentation is required to prove that many of the wild fish resources are in steep decline. The report includes a recommendation to Norwegian political leaders to take immediate steps to protect the species which are threatened with extinction and to introduce initiatives designed to replenish stocks of wild fish.

International action

The Norwegian Parliamentary Committee on Trade has effectuated an important political work, but recommendations to political leaders to replenish stocks is simply not enough. If we study the results of the two Canadian researchers, it is not enough to concentrate on fishery practices of individual countries. Ivar Kristiansen and the politicians in the Norwegian Parliament must cast their gaze far beyond Norway's national boundaries. The statistics with which the UN's FAO (Food and Agriculture Organisation) operates are too old and too limited. The FAO claims in the last report it issued that international fisheries are relatively stable.

The conservation of wild fisheries resources is a matter of and for global concern, responsibility and action, and fish farming is not necessarily the answer - in that the industry is itself dependent on fish caught in the wild and also faces sustainability issues. It's only a matter of time until the consumption of fish becomes a matter of ethics, and that major food suppliers such as Unilever issue demands that any fish purchased by them must have been harvested in a manner that guarantees sustainability.

A stable supply of fish at current levels is no longer a certainty. The two Canadian researchers have called out the warning. It is in everyone's best interest that the fishing nations of the world get together to develop new arenas and administrative regimes that can secure the replenishment of threatened species stocks and the protection and sustainability of those that are currently strong.



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