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Massive Decrease in North Atlantic Fish, Researchers Report

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In the last 50 years, the number of fish people most like to eat has decreased by more than half in the North Atlantic Ocean, and the culprit is fishing, according to three researchers at the AAAS Annual Meeting in Boston. Speaking at a press briefing on Saturday, 16 February, they said that the amount of fuel and energy required to catch the fish that are left has increased ten-fold, and the price of the fish on the open market is also on the rise.

“Seafood is becoming something for the rich, and where is it coming from now – from developing countries,” said Reg Watson of the University of British Columbia. “Within 10 years, we’ll be talking about some of these fish as if they were a myth.”

The researchers, who used new mapping techniques to draw their conclusions, spoke at a session at the AAAS Annual Meeting entitled, “Fisheries-induced Changes in Marine Ecosystems.” They said that \$2.5 billion in government subsidies of the fisheries industries around the world had contributed to the problem, and recommended substantial reduction in fishing fleets, phasing out of subsidies, and the development of sizable “no-take zones” that would allow the fish population to recover.

“Policy focuses on a fishery by fishery approach,” said Andrew Rosenthal of the University of New Hampshire. “The problem is that we are moving boats around like deck chairs on the Titanic...If you want to protect food security, you have to have a (worldwide) recovery plan.”

Asked if he were optimistic, Rosenthal, a former deputy director of the National Marine Fishery Service, pointed to the tremendous wealth of the nations that share the North Atlantic Ocean.

“If you can’t reverse a decline in the number of fish in the North Atlantic with all the resources of those countries, it’s hard for me to imagine anywhere else finding a solution,” Rosenthal said. But he noted that action will come only if the crisis becomes a public concern.

“The public must be drawn in because they fund the subsidies,” Rosenthal said. “Unless this catches the public eye, it won’t work.”

The new satellite technology that has made it possible to map the level of fish populations worldwide also allows researchers to verify the catches that nations report to international organizations. Some countries have exaggerated the number of fish they report in order to avoid the concern that their fish reserves are decreasing.

“There is a form of corruption in over-reporting,” said Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre. “We will be able to track people who consistently break the rules.”

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