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Saturday, 16 February, 2002, 23:33 GMT

Fish 'massacre' in North Atlantic

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By BBC News Online's Jonathan Amos in Boston



If current over-fishing continues in the North Atlantic, trawlers could soon be left chasing jellyfish and even plankton to make "fake" fish products.

The claim comes from scientists who have just completed the first comprehensive assessment of fish stocks in the North Atlantic Ocean.

Their study shows that across the region as a whole, fish numbers are now just one sixth of what they were 100 years ago.

Details of the study have been released at the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Boston.

“
Within 10 years we'll be talking about fish as if they were a myth
”

Reg Watson

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"We have looked at the entire North Atlantic - Canada, USA, Europe - and what we have found is that the situation in the region is far worse than people had anticipated," project leader Dr Daniel Pauly, from the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada, told the BBC.

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'Hidden' problem

Reg Watson, also from the University of British Columbia, who helped produce the study, said the crisis was evident in the collapse in catches.

"If you look at those prime table-fish - the ones we value the most, the fin fish - in the 1960s, we had about 21 lbs (9 kg) per person, now we're down to a third of that; we're down to about 7 lbs (3 kg) per person. If you extrapolate that very straight linear trend, within 10 years we'll be talking about fish as if they were a myth; as if they were fond memories."

The shortage in the North Atlantic is having an impact elsewhere, as more and more fish are imported into Western Europe and North America from other parts of the world, effectively "hiding the crisis" from their consumers.

The researchers say that only comprehensive action can save the North Atlantic from an ocean-wide collapse in fish.

They urge the immediate introduction of marine reserves, cuts in fishing fleets and the abandonment of subsidies (now around \$2.5bn a year). If these measures are not taken, they say, the fishing industry could soon have to turn to species like jellyfish and plankton to make alternative fish products.

'Act of revulsion'

"If we continue the way we are, in a few decades our definition of fish will have to change; people will not know real fish, they will only know processed stuff that is shaped like fish," Dr Pauly said.

Andy Rosenberg, of the University of New Hampshire, and former deputy director of the US National Marine Fishery Service, is pessimistic that anything will be done to save fish stocks.

"There are some treaties in the UN now which are for joint enforcement and monitoring agreements, but I think the timescale is far too long.

"Things like the International Plan of Action, which is a voluntary agreement, has a timescale that is still probably a decade. But there is no reason why it cannot be accelerated if the political will is there to do it."

Dr Pauly added: "The only thing that might work is if there is an act of revulsion on the part of the public similar to that which brought an end to whaling. For me, unless the public catches the fire, it won't happen."

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