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North Atlantic study reveals food fish catches have declined by half - despite tripled fishing effort

At present rate of decline, most valuable seafoods will be only a memory within a decade say scientists

An international group of leading fisheries scientists will release the results of the first ever ocean-wide synthesis of the status of fisheries in the North Atlantic today at a press conference at the American Association of the Advancement of Science in Boston.

The scientists will present a new portrait of the state of the fisheries which shows that over the last fifty years, the catch of our preferred food fish species such as cod, tuna, haddock, flounder and hake, has decreased by more than half despite a tripling in fishing effort.

“The only way we are maintaining yield is by increasing effort,” says Dr. Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, and the head of the large international project. “But you need fish to make fish, and so we have created a massive reduction in productivity.”

While the disastrous collapses in areas like New England and Newfoundland have appeared to be local in scale, this new ocean wide synthesis reveals that the collapse applies to the entire North Atlantic Ocean.

“You may think we are making headway with a few individual stocks, but overall we are unequivocally losing the battle to manage fisheries in the North Atlantic,” says Pauly. “Unless you have both long term and large spatial scales, as we have mapped, you cannot see the big picture. The problem is profound at an ocean-wide scale.”

Serial depletion of large predatory fishes at the top of all marine food webs means the major fisheries are now invertebrates. “We are fishing for bait and headed for jellyfish,” says Pauly.

Ironically, no ocean in the world has had more research dollars and government subsidies for fisheries than the North Atlantic. This is where modern fisheries science started. “Yet today, the large fish we find in our local markets are being imported from developing regions of the world such as West Africa, South East Asia and other areas masking our own crisis,” says Reg Watson of the University of British Columbia. “We are paying fishers in other oceans to grind down their marine ecosystems for our consumption. This is a serious concern for global food security.”

The researchers' comprehensive analysis of the state of the North Atlantic also examines the gross economic figures as well as the fisheries subsidies and fuel consumed in search of fish.

"Approximately 2.5 billion dollars of tax-payers money are spent each year subsidizing fishing fleets which spend the money on ever augmenting their technological ability to search out the last fish left," says economist Rashid Sumaila of the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. The spiraling costs include the price of fuel. Fishers burn more and more fuel as they increase their efforts competing to capture the last of the dwindling resources. "The fuel energy needed to capture a ton of fish has doubled over the last twenty years," says Peter Tyedmers of Dalhousie University.

"The national and international institutions mandated to control and to prevent the growth of excessive fishing effort have largely failed in their mission," says Pauly. "Our study shows this."

Andy Rosenberg, a Dean and fisheries scientist at the University of New Hampshire and former deputy director of the National Marine Fishery Service declares that this new overall picture verifies his ten years of experiences struggling for the recovery of individual stocks. Rosenberg spearheaded the partial closure of George's Bank.

"Policy has followed a fishery by fishery approach. It doesn't work," says Rosenberg. "You can't fix this one fishery at a time, because the boats just move around - the effort simply shifts to somewhere else and makes their problems worse."

"The necessary next steps are substantial reduction of fishing fleets, reduction and eventual abolition of subsidies to industrial fisheries, and unavoidably, the establishment of networks of "no-take" marine reserves: to replenish the oceans' depleted resources and to restore productivity," says Pauly. "In order to restore productivity to a fishery, the broader ecosystem with its many parts needs to be conserved."

"The only solution is serious and immediate action to reduce the number of boats and to work towards a basin wide ecosystem approach that considers all species," says Rosenberg.

"Systematically we have a huge problem. We can't keep addressing this one symptom at a time."

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The scientists will present their detailed findings on Saturday February 16th from 9am to noon, followed by a press conference at 1 p.m EST.

For more information on the study's results go to www.seaweb.org/AAAS2002 and for assistance contacting speakers please call Jessica Brown at #202/497-8375 or #831/212-5948.

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