

Complete collapse of North Atlantic fishing predicted

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The entire North Atlantic is being so severely overfished that it may completely collapse by 2010, reveals the first comprehensive survey of the entire ocean's fishery.

"We'll all be eating jellyfish sandwiches," says Reg Watson, a fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia. Putting new ocean-wide management plans into place is the only way to reverse the trend, Watson and his colleagues say.

North Atlantic catches have fallen by half since 1950, despite a tripling of the effort put into catching them. The total number of fish in the ocean has fallen even further, they say, with just one sixth as many high-quality "table fish" like cod and tuna as there were in 1900. Fish prices have risen six fold in real terms in 50 years.

The shortage of table fish has forced a switch to other species. "The jellyfish sandwich is not a metaphor - jellyfish is being exported from the US," says Daniel Pauly, also at the University of British Columbia. "In the Gulf of Maine people were catching cod a few decades ago. Now they're catching sea cucumber. By earlier standards, these things are repulsive," he says.

Off limits

The only hope for the fishery is to drastically limit fishing, for instance by declaring large portions of the ocean off-limits and at the same time reducing the number of fishing ships. Piecemeal efforts to protect certain fisheries have only caused the fishing fleet to overfish somewhere else, such as west Africa.

"It's like shuffling the deckchairs on the Titanic," says Andrew Rosenberg, at the University of New Hampshire. He says the number of boats must be reduced: "Less is actually more with fisheries. If you fish less you get more fish."

Normally, falling catches would drive some fishers out of business. But government subsidies actually encourage overfishing, Watson says, with subsidies totalling about \$2.5 billion a year in the North Atlantic.

However, Rosenberg was sceptical that any international fishing agreements currently on the table will turn the tide in a short enough timescale. The UN's Food and Agriculture Organization and the OECD have initiatives but these are voluntary, he says. A UN-backed monitoring and enforcement plan of action is being discussed but could take 10 years to come into force.

Pauly says only a public reaction like that against whaling in the 1970s would be enough to bring about sufficient change in the way the fish stocks are managed.

The new survey was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's 2002 annual meeting in Boston.

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