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NORTHWEST ATLANTIC OCEAN NEEDS MORE PROTECTION

Poll shows the public strongly favours more fully protected marine areas in New England and Atlantic Canada just as a new scientific study shows how urgently they are needed

Halifax, Nova Scotia: February 16, 2002

A vast majority of the public in New England and Atlantic Canada strongly supports protection of the oceans, says a poll released today. Five leading American and Canadian marine conservation groups who commissioned the poll are calling upon their governments to fully protect more areas of the ocean.

This encouraging public support comes as alarming scientific results on overfishing were released on the weekend by Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre at the meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Boston. This study reveals that despite the tripling of fishing efforts over the past 50 years in the North Atlantic, catch of food fish has declined by half. The effect of such overfishing has not only been a severe reduction in populations of cod, halibut, haddock and flounder, but a fundamental undermining of the North Atlantic Ocean's ecosystem.

Correcting this problem won't be easy. But one tool that has been found to be effective in other parts of the world--yet has not been adequately employed by either the United States or Canada-- is the designation or setting aside of marine protected areas, especially fully protected "no-take" areas in which all extractive activities such as fishing, dredging and oil and gas drilling are prohibited. Scientists agree that fully protected areas are essential to help replenish overfished stocks and restore the health of ocean ecosystems. Residents of New England and Atlantic Canada fully support the idea and strongly favour the establishment of more such areas off their shores.

The poll found:

- The public is very supportive of establishing fully protected "no-take" ocean areas that prohibit all extractive activities, including commercial and recreational fishing. (New England 74%, Atlantic Canada 73%).
- Shockingly, most residents thought 20-23% of oceans are already fully protected, when less than 1% of New England's ocean waters and none in Atlantic Canada are fully protected.
- Upon learning that less than 1% of the waters off New England and Atlantic Canada are fully protected, 82% of New Englanders and 87% of Atlantic Canada residents say this fact alone is a convincing reason for more waters to be fully protected.
- 66% of New Englanders and 77% of Atlantic Canadians are willing to live with the impacts of restricting human activities in the ocean, including short-term costs in lost jobs and higher prices for goods and services, in order to obtain the long-term benefits from healthier fish populations and increased tourism for future generations.

"Both the United States and Canadian governments need to create public processes that will create fully protected areas in the ocean, which are science-based, participatory and also give full consideration to fishing industries" said Robert Rangeley, Atlantic Marine Program Director of WWF-Canada. "It is time that governments of these two countries afford the same kind of protection to the wild creatures of the ocean as they do to wildlife and wild habitats on land," said Martin Willison of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society. "People who live in New England and Atlantic Canada highly value marine life that dwell in the ocean and want their governments to do more to protect them and give them a chance to recover."

"Establishing networks of "no-take" marine reserves is an essential step that must be taken along with substantially reducing fishing fleets and abolishing subsidies to industrial fisheries in order to restore productivity to the fisheries of the North Atlantic," said Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre. "This poll reveals that there is strong public support for the same solution to the effects of overfishing that is being promoted by the scientific community. If this is both scientifically sound and the public agrees, how can we not do this? The alternative is the continued decline of what little is left."

The poll is based on 750 interviews in the Gulf of Maine region; 450 interviews conducted across Maine, New Hampshire, Vermont, Massachusetts and Rhode Island and 300 interviews conducted across the provinces of New Brunswick and Nova Scotia. The poll was commissioned by The Conservation Law Foundation, The Ocean Conservancy, Environmental Defense, World Wildlife Fund Canada and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society together sponsored a poll that interviewed 750 residents of New England and Atlantic Canada.

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Daniel Pauly's report may be found at www.seaweb.org or www.eureka.org.

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