



Press Briefing

Press Conference by deepsea conservation coalition

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition was urging the United Nations to declare an immediate moratorium on bottom-trawl fishing to protect the world's "underwater mountains", or seamounts, and their vulnerable inhabitants, correspondents were told today at a Headquarters press conference sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

In parallel with the United Nations Open-Ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea, which opened today and will conclude on Friday, experts of the Coalition, a broad international alliance of environmentalists, briefed on the conservation and management of sea beds in areas outside international jurisdiction, and specifically on the threat of deep-sea trawling on sea mounts and their rich sea life.

The participants were: Daniel Pauly, Director of the Fisheries Centre, University of British Columbia; Elliot Norse, President, Marine Conservation Biology Institute; and Matthew Gianni, former fisherman turned international fisheries expert. The press conference included a video, as well as a live feed from the Greenpeace vessel Rainbow Warrior, presently undertaking research in international waters.

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition includes Conservation International, Greenpeace International, World Conservation, the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, the Natural Resources Defense Council, and the New England Aquarium, among others, as well as numerous national environmental organizations worldwide.

The brief video on bottom trawling and its impacts explained that seamounts were underwater mountains, which provided hard substrata upon which a unique blend of coral, crabs, fish, octopus and squid lived. Seamounts attracted many species, which, in turn, attracted commercial trawlers. Decades of over-fishing had depleted fish stocks in many coastal zones, so now the harvesting was taking place in deep-sea mounts. Each year, bottom trawling devastated an area twice the size of the United States. The result was that ancient habitat was being turned into wasteland.

The video further explained that a systematic destruction of those deep-sea reefs meant that extinction after extinction was occurring, even before the animals had been studied. Centuries-old coral formations would not recover in our lifetimes. In other words, a vital habitat for fish, which provided shelter and food, was being destroyed.

Dr. Norse of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute said that bottom trawling was devastating life on seamounts, on which he had published a study eight years ago. There were anywhere from 10,000 to 100,000 seamounts scattered throughout the oceans. More was known about the topography of Mars than about the deep sea on earth. Many mounts replete with dense coral, sponge and sea life were in international waters in the high seas, beyond international jurisdiction.

He said that marine biologists considered seamounts to be ideal for the study of new species. Unfortunately, they were being raked by bottom trawlers, comprised of huge nets and armed with steel doors and heavy rollers to catch slow growing fishes. Trawlers smashed and ripped ancient species, seriously threatening the biodiversity of vulnerable deep-sea habitats and ecosystems. That danger was so serious that 1,136 scientists from 69 nations recently called for a global moratorium on the fishing practice.

Mr. Goanna, a former fisherman, recalled that in 2002 and 2003 the United Nations General Assembly had called for urgent consideration of the risks to the biodiversity of seamounts and coldwater corals. That call had been based on a recommendation of the informal consultative process, which recommends actions to be taken by the Assembly on oceans-related issues.

In addition, he noted, the last meeting -- the seventh of the conference of parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, held in Malaysia in February -- had recommended that the Assembly take urgent action, by way of an interim prohibition to counter the threats to the biodiversity of seamounts. This week's meeting was key in the process of determining how to move from expressions of concern to formal proposals aimed at solving the problem.

Among the main messages of his report being released today, entitled, "High Seas Bottom Trawl Fisheries and Their Impacts on the Biodiversity of Vulnerable Deep-Sea Ecosystems", was that the deep sea harbours a global reservoir of biodiversity, potentially as rich as the tropical rainforest or shallow tropical reefs. The number of seamounts was not known, nor were the names and numbers of all of the species inhabiting them. It was known, however, that bottom trawling was highly destructive to sea mounts and other deep-sea coral ecosystems, of which between 95 per cent and 98 per cent were being destroyed by bottom trawl gear with their very large nets and doors weighing up to five tons apiece.

He said the number of countries involved in deep -sea trawling was relatively small, at about 11 countries, but those took 90 per cent of the catch in 2001, with the European Union countries responsible for approximately 60 per cent, and one country, Spain, responsible for about 40 per cent. So, it was mostly developed countries out on the high seas destroying the biodiversity deemed in 1969 to be the common heritage. And, only a small number were reaping the economic benefit.

While the actual number of vessels involved was relatively small -- approximately 200 -- the damage those caused was potentially huge, he went on. The economic value of those fisheries was \$300 million to \$400 million per year, or 0.5 per cent of the value of the global fish catch. Fish taken on the high seas, however, made absolutely no contribution to global food security, as that produce was usually destined for the European and United States markets. Yet, the practice was almost completely unregulated, representing a major gap in

global governance.

He said that the General Assembly had a role to play in ensuring that the high seas were properly protected and the fisheries were made sustainable. Governments should heed the call of the non-governmental community this week and forward that recommendation to the Assembly for action at its next session, he urged.

Daniel Pauly, from the University of British Columbia, said that the assertions of the non-governmental organizations were not wild claims of environmentalists, but backed up by solid numbers. He had identified some 14,000 seamounts. There were probably 100,000 of them, but the high-resolution maps were generally classified. A file was available on each of the 14,000 he had identified, which contained location and depth. Of those, just half were under the jurisdiction of countries and could be protected by them. The other half were in the open seas. Far more had been fished than studied, because most of the imagery required very expensive high technology.

It was believed, however, that 10 per cent of all underwater species occurred only at the seamounts, he said. The ecosystems of the seamounts were very rich, as the mounts were exposed to lateral currents and "grabbed" whatever flowed by. The animals fed not so much on what rolled down, but what passed by. So, there was a concentration of food generated by the currents. Moreover, all of the invertebrates in seamounts had a fan-like shape, which enabled them to capture things passing by. Because of that shape, however, they were very easy to destroy.

Also, he continued, the animals on seamounts were extremely old. The oldest was the orange ruffie, which lived up to 150 years. If you eat the filet, formerly known as slime heads, you're eating something that was 150 years old. The animals' vulnerability was not only due to their old age and longevity, but also to the fact that those aggregated on top of the mounts, where the current concentrated. Seamount fisheries were the least protected habitats in the world, he asserted.

An environmentalist aboard the Rainbow Warrior explained that the ship was sailing in international waters near New Zealand and stressed that the United Nations must play a key role in protecting the commons for all, by passing a resolution calling for an immediate moratorium on bottom trawling. The crew was on the high seas in an attempt to document and bring to the public's attention that nearly 11 wealthy nations were exploiting valuable marine life for the sake of a few fish served up on the plates of wealthy customers. It was the duty of all nations to work together to protect those common resources. She hoped that joint efforts would persuade policy makers to take the necessary steps to protect marine life before it was too late.

Asked to name the 11 countries, Mr. Gianni said that, in addition to Spain, they were: Portugal; Latvia; Estonia; Lithuania; Norway; Iceland; Denmark; New Zealand; Japan; and the Russian Federation. Of those, probably the three with the biggest impact were the European Union countries, the Russian Federation and New Zealand.

Replying to another question, Dr. Pauly said that 20 tons of fuel was required per ton of fish caught. The deeper one fished, the more expensive it became, he added.

Mr. Gianni said that about 200,000 tons of fish were taken through bottom trawling, while the global fish production was 130 million tons. As a precedent for action, he cited the United Nations drift net moratorium, which went into effect in December 2002, and had been a very successful effort by the General Assembly to regulate that serious threat to the high seas. In fact, that moratorium basically ended the practice.

* * * * *