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7, Jun 2004

Conservation coalition seeks UN resolution to halt destruction of deep-sea biodiversity

New York, US – A broad international coalition of environmentalists today called on the United Nations to suspend the most destructive fishing practice on the high seas. Bottom trawl fishing in international waters may be wiping out hundreds or even thousands of undiscovered species that could offer important benefits for humankind, says the group.

According to a study released on the opening day of a key UN meeting, bottom trawlers are increasingly targeting commercially valuable fish found near underwater mountains, or seamounts, cold-water corals, and other vulnerable deep-sea habitats in unprotected areas of international waters. Scientists believe these largely unexplored habitats are extremely rich in biodiversity and could be home to the largest remaining pool of undiscovered marine species.

"Bottom trawling is eliminating entire ecosystems and species, in some cases before we have even learned of their existence," said Karen Sack, of Greenpeace International. "In the past fifty years, we've already wiped out 90% of the top predatory fish species. We are now flirting with a global catastrophe."

"At this rate, the fish will be all gone by the time methods have been developed that allow all countries — rich and poor alike — to fish these waters sustainably," said Simon Cripps, Director of WWF's Endangered Seas Programme.

Bottom trawling plows up the ocean floor, destroying everything in its path, including fragile corals, sponges, and other deep-sea habitats. Underwater surveys have shown that up to 95% of deep-water coral reefs on seamounts can be destroyed by bottom trawl fishing. Video images of impacted areas and new scientific evidence on the age and slow growth rate of corals demonstrate that ecosystems that are sometimes hundreds or thousands of years old are usually damaged beyond repair.

"The deep seas are our planet's last frontier," said Matthew Gianni, the study's author and a former fisherman turned fisheries expert. "The least-explored habitats on Earth aren't the Andes or the remote tropical rain forests of Asia — they're seamounts, deep-



Polyps of *Lophelia pertusa* cold-water coral, Trondheimsfjorden, Norway. © WWF-Canon / Erling Svensen

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sea corals, hydrothermal vents, and other deep ocean features that are teeming with unique and important marine life. These areas must be protected before they are lost."

The push to suspend bottom trawling on the high seas comes as the UN Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea (UNICPOLOS) gathers oceans, environmental, and fisheries officials from around the world for a series of meetings in New York during the week of 7–11 June.

The group of environmental organizations, the Deep-Sea Conservation Coalition (1), is calling on UNICPOLOS delegates to back a UN General Assembly resolution that would prohibit high seas bottom trawling until deep-sea biodiversity conditions and the sustainability of high seas bottom fishing have been scientifically assessed and legally binding regimes have been established to protect this biodiversity and ensure sustainable fisheries.

The Gianni report emphasizes that a small group of countries are destroying the biodiversity of the global oceans commons for relatively insignificant economic gain. The report identifies eleven countries — Spain, Russia, Portugal, Norway, Estonia, Denmark/Faeroe Islands, Japan, Lithuania, Iceland, New Zealand, and Latvia — as taking 95% of the fish caught in bottom trawl fisheries on the high seas in 2001. Of these, European Union countries (including Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia) took approximately 60% of the catch. Spain alone accounted for 40% of the overall global high seas bottom trawl catch in 2001.

"It's not right that a single method of fishing being practiced by only a handful of nations could cause the extinction of species unknown to science and destroy any potential for sustainable fisheries," said Arlo Hemphill of Conservation International. "That is why it is incumbent on the United Nations to declare an immediate suspension of bottom trawling on the high seas."

The Gianni report also highlights that deep-sea marine life, though largely unexplored, has already been shown to be an important source of medicine. Some deep-sea corals produce antibiotics, and others contain pain-killing compounds. Still another deep-sea species contain high concentrations of prostaglandins, compounds used to treat asthma and heart disease.

Momentum in favor of protecting places in the high seas has been gaining in recent years.

In 2002 and 2003, UNICPOLOS and the UN General Assembly issued statements calling for urgent improvements in managing risks to the biodiversity of seamounts. In February 2004, the Conference of the Parties of the Convention on Biological Diversity called on the UN and other international bodies to take rapid action, such as an interim prohibition on destructive practices adversely affecting seamount biodiversity.

That same month, 1,136 marine scientists from 69 countries signed a letter supporting swift action to protect imperiled deep sea coral and sponge ecosystems. These scientists identified bottom trawling as a particular threat and called upon the UN General Assembly to declare a moratorium on bottom trawling on the high seas.

Dr Daniel Pauly, Director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia co-edited a new report, *Seamounts: Biodiversity and Fisheries*, which also was released at the UN meeting. The report found that undersea mountains support some of the planet's richest biodiversity and are especially vulnerable to bottom trawling.

Note:

The Deep Sea Conservation Coalition includes Conservation International, Greenpeace International, IUCN–The World Conservation Union, Marine Conservation Biology Institute, Natural Resources Defense Council, New England Aquarium, Oceana, Pew Charitable Trusts, WWF International, together with numerous national environmental organizations throughout the world.

For further information:

Peter Bryant

WWF Endangered Seas Programme

tel.: +41 22 364 9028

Page last updated : June 07, 2004

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