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Watchdog programs offer shoppers choice

Two weeks ago I had the pleasure of sharing the stage with Dr. Daniel Pauly, a world-renowned fisheries biologist. We were at a SeaChoice event, discussing the future of our oceans and how programs like SeaChoice could help by giving consumers a tool to make sustainable choices.

Dr. Pauly was in the middle of his presentation when he popped up a slide that really blew me away. Well, two slides, actually. The first was a photo taken from space that showed two little dots with gradually widening lines trailing out from behind them. The dots, he said, were bottom-trawling fishing boats. The lines were plumes of mud and dirt dredged up behind them.

It was a powerful image, because it showed the lasting effect these boats can have. Long after they've passed over, the water is still clouded with silt and you can imagine the sea floor looking much worse. Bottom trawlers drag heavy, weighted gear along the ocean floor dredging up whatever sea life is unfortunate enough to be caught in their nets. Most of those sea creatures are considered "trash fish," unmarketable, and hence tossed overboard. Most of them also die.

Never mind that many of those trash fish serve as food for the marketable predatory fish that most restaurants and consumers like to eat. There is no immediate market for them, so they are considered worthless. This kind of twisted economics simply has no place in today's world. In nature, where everything is interconnected, everything has value.

But it was the next slide that really made your jaw drop. It too was taken from space. But instead of being two dots and two lines in a vast ocean, the photo showed dot after dot and line after line, filling the frame so much that it looked like fields of wheat being harvested. This was a trawling fleet off the coast of China, methodically scouring the ocean floor bare.

That such destructive fishing can still be occurring at such a scale is shocking. Especially given what we know is going on in our oceans. They are in serious trouble. We no longer have the luxury of wasting most of what we pull up or steamrolling over important habitat. Most of the world's fisheries are fully exploited or overexploited and scientists are very concerned about major crashes unless we start changing our practices.

Our poor fisheries management is being supported by increasingly efficient technologies. Global catches aren't plummeting yet because we are getting better and better at finding fish. This effectively masks the problem of dwindling supply until it's too late. We've seen this happen before - like with the Atlantic cod.

Changing fishing practices and fisheries management is up to our elected leaders. We need comprehensive ecosystem-based planning processes to phase out destructive fishing gear, better manage fish stocks and decide where and when to fish. This includes a system of marine protected areas where no fishing is allowed, to give the fish a chance to recover.

That's the job of our leaders. But everyone can help by supporting sustainably caught seafood and choosing not to eat fish that comes from threatened stocks. There are several programs out there to help

people choose more sustainable options. SeaChoice (seachoice.org) is one. It was designed to help shoppers, chefs and restaurant owners choose fish that are being harvested in a sustainable manner. Many restaurants are now making note of where their seafood comes from and how it was caught on their menus. SeaChoice can help.

When I was a boy, jigging for halibut off Spanish Banks near Vancouver, I could never have imagined needing a tool like SeaChoice. Back then the seas seemed limitless. Today, you won't find halibut off Spanish Banks anymore. We know the seas aren't limitless. We just have to stop treating them like they are.

Take the Nature Challenge and learn more at www.davidsuzuki.org.