



ENVIRONMENT: Ocean Fisheries Maxed Out

Stephen Leahy

BROOKLIN, Canada, Mar 5 (IPS) - Two-thirds of fish stocks in the world's high seas are overfished, while most of those closer to shore are failing or fished to the maximum, a new U.N. report said Monday.

More and stronger regional fisheries management organisations are needed to rebuild depleted stocks and prevent the collapse of other stocks, warned the FAO's latest "State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture" (SOFIA) report.

Ocean fisheries have "most likely" reached their zenith, said FAO Assistant Director-General for Fisheries Ichiro Nomura.

In fact, that peak may have been reached some time ago. The annual world fish catch since the late 1980s has been stalled at between 85 million and 95 million tonnes. The SOFIA 2006 report records marine fisheries catch at 85.8 million tonnes and notes that 25 percent of marine stocks are overexploited or depleted while 52 percent are "fully exploited".

In the open ocean, where the deep-sea trawlers roam unrestricted, stocks of hakes, Atlantic cod, halibut, orange roughy, bluefin tuna and sharks are all in deep trouble. "They (open ocean species) are key indicators of the state of a massive piece of the ocean ecosystem," said Nomura in a statement.

In recent years, numerous scientific studies of the oceans have clearly indicated they are in trouble. A major study published last fall in Science magazine projected that every commercial fishery in the world will be wiped out before 2050 and that the oceans may never recover without significant reform of the fisheries industry.

A month later, U.N. talks failed to establish a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawling, widely acknowledged as wasteful and damaging to ocean bottom ecosystems.

In February, researchers at the University of British Columbia in Canada calculated that these trawlers receive 152 million dollars a year in fuel and other subsidies. Without these subsidies, the few hundred ships that make up the global deep-sea trawler fleet would actually lose millions of dollars a year, said Rashid Sumaila, a researcher at the University of British Columbia.

Japan, South Korea, Spain, Australia and Russia are the five largest payers of such subsidies, Sumaila said in an interview.

"These subsidies pay the deep-sea trawlers to do something appalling and something they'd never do on their own because it's uneconomic," said Elliott Norse, president of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, a scientific environmental group in the U.S. state of Washington.

"It's an example of unintended consequences of some government policies," Norse told IPS. But it is something that governments need to fix and fast, he added.

Also in need of fast repair are the world's 39 multilateral regional fisheries management organisations (RFMOs), he said.

RFMOs are the fisheries managers in charge of most of world's fish stocks outside of the unregulated high seas. Despite the FAO's strong support and hopes of expanding RFMOs everywhere, the SOFIA report notes that some of the most depleted fisheries such as the Northeast Atlantic and Southeast Atlantic have been run by RFMOs for many years.

Countries often opt out of an RFMO if they want to catch more fish than their allocation, says Daniel Pauly, a professor and director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia.

Small countries like those in the Caribbean region can't afford RFMO membership fees, so the catch quotas in the waters around their countries are decided by global fishing nations like Japan and Taiwan, Pauly told IPS.

Despite his reservations, "We need strong RFMOs and to have them protect the high seas," he said.

"Local countries should automatically be members and not have to pay membership fees. And if the science says 'no more fishing', then countries cannot opt out," Pauly said.

Currently, politics trumps science in most decisions about fish stocks, he noted.

For that to change, the mandate for RFMOs must switch from management of fish stocks for maximum exploitation to protection of the stocks and the ecosystem.

"The primary mission of RFMOs should be to prevent fisheries from wrecking the marine ecosystem," Pauly told IPS.

A global network of off-limits marine preserves are equally important. Currently less than 0.6 percent of the oceans are in reserves and much less than that is fully protected from fishing, says Pauly.

Nearly all countries have agreed at international meetings, such as 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg and at the Convention on Biodiversity, to create a global network of marine protected areas (MPAs) by 2012. Experts suggest 30 to 50 percent of the oceans may need to be off-limits to fishing if the oceans are to recover.

While most countries already protect 10 to 12 percent of their land in parks and reserves, only the United States has actually made major additions to its MPAs, such as last year's creation of the world's largest reserve off Hawaii.

A global fisheries institution that uses science to determine how many fish, of what kind and where can be caught on a sustainable basis without harming the marine ecosystem, which that would also be good for fishers and their communities, would be the ideal solution, says Norse.

"Maybe that should be the FAO's job instead of producing more statistical reports," he commented. "We don't have time for more fruitless discussion."

Pauly is also impatient. "Our institutions are not responding fast enough to the industrial might and scale of change that is happening," he said. "The rate at which our institutions take action is simply too slow." (FIN/2007)