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WWF urges Hong Kong to reel in fishing industry

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HONG KONG (Reuters) - The World Wildlife Fund urged Hong Kong on Thursday to use an unexpected budget surplus to phase out the territory's fishing industry, which the global conservation group says is depleting fish stocks in the area.

"The marine ecology is in a state of crisis ... We can afford to resolve this problem today, now, immediately," WWF's Hong Kong chairman Markus Shaw told reporters.

Last week, Hong Kong's Financial Secretary Henry Tang said the city will post a HK\$55.1 billion (\$7 billion) fiscal surplus for 2006/2007 -- well above forecasts -- due to a strong economy.

The WWF has released a report compiled by the University of British Columbia on how Hong Kong could benefit by cutting the size of its remaining fishing fleet and introducing no fishing zones.

Despite some marine parks, Hong Kong's fish stocks have been depleted over the past several decades by poor management, a lack of a licensing system allowing Chinese vessels to trawl local waters unchecked, as well as pollution, dredging and reclamation.

Instead of introducing a fishing license system, which the WWF says is a key for conservation, Hong Kong has been handing out fuel subsidies to its fishermen at an estimated cost of HK\$48 million (\$6.15 million) each year.

Shaw said Hong Kong's remaining 10,000 fishermen now catch some 29,000 tonnes of fish annually from local waters, representing around 10 percent of their total haul which is largely caught elsewhere as a result of the depletion.

"The average size of fish caught in Hong Kong ... is 10 grams or less," Shaw said. "These fish are not being caught for our dinner table. They're mashed up and made into fishmeal for our fish farms."

Banning fishing and trawling in larger swathes of Hong Kong's coastal waters as well as helping struggling local fishermen move to other jobs would allow fish stocks to replenish, the report said. It might even allow eco-tourism in Hong Kong.

"The gains are big enough to cover the loss and costs we see in the few sectors," said Rashid Sumaila from the university's Fisheries Center, which conducted the study.

"For the fisheries, rebuilding make sense," he said, adding that while there would be fewer fishermen, they would be able to catch more higher-priced fish.

The report also suggested a majority of Hong Kong's fishermen would be willing to accept new restrictions or be bought out by the government.

Shaw called on the government to compensate fisherman for a switch in livelihood and pay them for their boats. He said that

shouldn't be seen as a bailout, but a crucial and logical means to ease pressure on the depleted seas.

"If you allow (the fishing sector) to continue simply to die off naturally, then you're not solving the problem of eco-system damage that's being done at the time," said Shaw.

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