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'Best hope at sustainable fisheries' short-changed by conservation efforts: UBC researchers

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Small scale fisheries produce as much annual catch for human consumption and use less than one-eighth the fuel as their industrial counterparts, but they are dealt a double-whammy by well-intentioned eco-labelling initiatives and ill-conceived fuel subsidies, according to a University of British Columbia study.

Small-scale fisheries are characterized as fishers operating in boats 15 metres or shorter.

"They are our best hope at sustainable fisheries," says Daniel Pauly, Director of the UBC Fisheries Centre and co-author of a study published in the current issue of the journal Conservation Biology.

The study shows the amount of subsidies large-scale, industrial fisheries receive versus small-scale, coastal fisheries. For instance, the average large-scale fisherman receives nearly 200 times the fuel subsidy that the average small-scale fisherman receives.

"This is because small scale fisheries employ more than 12 million people world-wide, compared to half a million in the industrial sector," says Jennifer Jacquet, study co-author and a PhD Candidate in the UBC Fisheries Centre. "And because small-scale fisheries use less fuel to catch fish."

An illustration comparing small- and large-scale fisheries is available at Sea Around Us.

"Small-scale fisheries use fishing gear that are more selective and far less destructive to deep sea environments," says Jacquet. "As a result they discard very little unwanted fish and almost all of their catch is used for human consumption."

Large-scale fisheries, on the other hand, typically do not target species for direct human consumption and discard an estimated 8-20 million tonnes of unwanted dead fish each year and reduces another 35 million tonnes of their annual catch to fishmeal.

Over the past decade, market-based sustainable seafood initiatives such as eco-labelling have been the predominant strategy for curtailing demand of dwindling fish stocks. The U.S. conservation community alone invested \$37 million between 1999 to 2004 to promote certification and "wallet cards" to encourage consumers to purchase seafood caught using sustainable practices.

"For the amount of resources invested, we haven't seen significant decrease in demand for species for which the global stocks are on the edge of collapse," says Pauly. "Market-based initiatives, while well-intentioned, unduly discriminate against small scale fishers for their lack of resources to provide data for certification."

Furthermore, small fishers simply can't compete on the open market with large fleets. Rashid Sumaila, also of the UBC Fisheries Centre, estimates that governments worldwide subsidize \$30-34 billion a year in fishing operations, of which \$25-27 billion go to large-scale fleets.

"It's an unfair disadvantage that in any other industry would have had people up in arms," says Jacquet. "But small-scale fishers are often in developing countries and have very little political influence."

Pauly and Jaquet say eliminating government subsidies is the most effective strategy towards significantly reducing pressure on vulnerable global fish stocks.

"Without subsidies, most large-scale fishing operations will be economically unviable," says Jacquet. "Small scale fishers will have a better chance of thriving in local markets, and global fish stocks will have an opportunity to rebound."

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