

Daniel Pauly: Toward a Conservation Ethics for the Sea

by Howard Silverman
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[Daniel Pauly](#), Professor and Director, Fisheries Centre, University of British Columbia, will give the opening address to the International Marine Conservation Congress, May 20, 2009 in Washington D.C. Here is the abstract: "Toward a Conservation Ethics for the Sea: Steps in a Personal and Intellectual Odyssey."

Since 1971, when I did my first intercontinental travel (from Germany, where I was studying, to Ghana, to do the field work for my Masters), I had the privilege of experiencing a multitude of countries, cultures, and modes of exploiting aquatic ecosystems in Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas. (This came along with a huge carbon footprint, as I now know.)

As a student, I learnt that we can 'manage' fisheries, and hence I saw my role as fisheries scientist (but also as a citizen of the world) as contributing to the progressive mastery that such management implies. Such mastery, one should think, should lead to a mosaic of management outcomes, depending on the local culture, and hence management choices. The resources declines I saw in various countries were boringly similar between countries, however, except for the fact that they sometimes were lagging in time, depending on the country 'development'.

The 1980s and 1990s were also the period when the recent emergence of Homo sapiens was established, along with the descent of all non-Africans from a small group which left Africa some 70,000 years ago. This re-enforced my belief in a basic similarity of the way human interact with nature ("eat it if you can"), beyond superficial differences dues to local constraints.

Now that our technology has essentially removed all constraints (distance offshore, depth, unpredictable storms, perishability of the catch, inability to accumulate capital, etc.) which earlier, along with limited markets, constrained fisheries, the way we interact with nature has been simplified ("eat it"), and we are at the onset of a catastrophic decline of marine biodiversity.

We are, however, a species that believes in and acts on myths (as evidenced by those that define our tribal, 'racial' or religious identity), and I believe that we will get out of the biodiversity crisis we are in only if we embed the fauna and flora around us into a mythology, a shared ethics of the sea, one that could be shared among all people on Earth, and which also could motivate political action (as myths generally do). This, I suggest, has the potential to reach beyond narcissistic consumers in rich countries, the present targets of our 'market-based' initiatives. This is where I am now.