



# Press Conference

Department of Public Information • News and Media Division • New York

## PRESS CONFERENCE ON STATE OF HIGH SEAS FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

Presenting the results of two recent independent, peer-reviewed studies at Headquarters today, the Pew Environment Group said that regional fisheries management organizations were failing in their mandated task of regulating fishing on the high seas, with significant loopholes and lax enforcement allowing illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing to continue.

“The goal of ensuring sustainable fisheries and healthy fish populations will never be met until the global system that manages these fish on the high seas is fixed,” Susan Lieberman, International Policy Director for the Pew Environment Group, said at a press conference on the margins of the Resumed Review Conference of the United Nations Fish Stocks Agreement, which opened at Headquarters today.

Joined by Sarika Cullis-Suzuki, researcher at the University of British Columbia, and Kristin von Kistowski, Senior Adviser to the Pew Environment Group, Ms. Lieberman said environmental impact studies should be required before fishing was allowed, and where no management existed, or no data was available, fishing should be prohibited. Endangered and critically endangered species, and those listed in appendix 1 of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) should not be fished on the high seas.

“We are calling on the [Review] meeting to take meaningful action — action with teeth,” Ms. Lieberman said, pointing out that the current legal regime for the long-term conservation and sustainable use of straddling and migratory fish stocks — established in 1995 by the Fish Stocks Agreement, which entered into force in 2001 — had not led to improvements in global fish stocks.

Emphasizing the problem’s urgency, she said the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimated that three quarters of the world’s fish stocks were overfished and two thirds of straddling fish stocks were fully or overexploited. If that data were extrapolated, global fish stocks would crash by around 2050, she warned. “We’re talking about the very future of food security on our planet,” she stressed, adding that for the 3 billion people who relied on fish as their primary source of protein — nearly half the planet’s population — the United Nations meeting was not an academic exercise.

Reporting on the study, which she co-authored with colleague Daniel Pauly and which was recently published in the journal *Marine Policy*, Ms. Cullis-Suzuki highlighted the gap “between talk and action” among the world’s 18 regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), which are mandated to manage and conserve fish stocks on the high seas. She said the study used a two-tiered approach to determine whether RFMOs were effective in theory — or on-paper, in terms of their written approach — and in practice, in terms of the fish stocks they managed. The results scored the on-paper effectiveness of RFMOs at 57 per cent and their “in-practice” effectiveness at 49 per cent. Indeed, 67 per cent of all stocks assessed under RFMO management were either completely exploited or depleted, according to the analysis.

She said the study also found that the establishment of an RFMO had, for the most part, had no effect on trends among declining stocks. In fact, the establishment of some RFMOs actually preceded a sharp decline in the stocks they managed. Moreover, the demonstrated lack of correlation between how an RFMO scored in each of the two tiers indicated that whatever the organizations said they were doing on the high seas, and what they were actually doing did not necessarily coincide.

Ms. Kistowski stressed that, given the rapid declines in fish stocks, the fight against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing was increasingly important. Her study — which analysed the measures taken by port States to report illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, and which was published last week in the journal *Science* — highlighted the weaknesses of such State control. Targeting eight RFMOs, the study had taken the

first comprehensive look at how well their measures worked and how they were implemented.

Its results revealed three major weaknesses, she said. First, there was a severe lack of transparency, data recording and information sharing. Two thirds of fishing vessels were neither tracked nor recorded by a serial number from the International Maritime Organization (IMO), which was only mandatory for merchant vessels. Secondly, there was poor compliance among port States, which, as members of RFMOs, had an obligation to fulfil their policies, but only did so at the rate of one out every four. Finally, with illegal operators easily able to move to regions with looser enforcement, the RFMO system lacked global reach, she said.

To fix the worldwide problem of illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, she said, a system with greater transparency, efficiency and global reach was needed. To that end, port States should not only sign, but also implement measures to combat illegal fishing, she said, adding that their inspection and enforcement regimes should be intensified. Additionally, all port States should sign and ratify the Port State Measures Agreement, which was the first legally binding international instrument aimed at achieving global coverage.

For their part, RFMOs should also require IMO numbers for all fishing vessels authorized to fish in their areas, she said, calling for improvements to measures undertaken by port States in line with minimum standards. Meanwhile, lists of vessels engaged in illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing should be organized, coordinated and shared, she added.

Responding to a question about the disparity between the effectiveness of RFMOs on paper and in practice, Ms. Cullis-Suzuki said the on-paper analysis examined the policies elaborated in the RFMOs' documents, while the in-practice approach considered how stocks were faring in terms of fishing pressure and biomass. For example, if biomass was small and fishing pressure high, an RFMO scored poorly. However, the two analyses should not be compared, she cautioned.

Asked whether further conclusions could be drawn about differences in regional enforcement, Ms. Kistowski said her team had analysed only publicly available data. Thus, while her study presented the best possible "snapshot", the picture had obvious gaps that could be traced back to the system's overall weaknesses, particularly the lack of transparency.

To a request for more information on how to curb the fishing of endangered species, Ms. Lieberman noted that very few RFMOs prohibited the retention of by-catch, adding that the Pew Environment Group was recommending that the fish stocks agreement, as well the RFMOS, at least call for such a ban.

Responding to a request for examples where stocks actually declined after the establishment of an RFMO, Ms. Cullis-Suzuki cited the history of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the 1969 establishment of which had been followed by a decline in the populations of different types of tuna.

Asked whether the conservation community was beginning to believe the international strategy should adopt an approach that "carved up the commons", Ms. Lieberman said there was much discussion of that question. The debate included suggestions that the freedom of the high seas was potentially no longer viable as a concept or ideal. She stressed that, if the system required accountability from RFMOs, the United Nations should assess their performance. Whatever actions were taken must have real consequences, she added.

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