

Why the World's Fisheries Are Going Bankrupt

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I'm in DC for the [AAAS annual meeting](#), and while this gathering of the world's smartest people (and the journalists who write about them) is big news in the science world, the real action is a few blocks away at the Capitol. There Democrats and Republicans are in a knife fight over the budget—and just as much, who can sound tougher about tackling the national debt. Rhetorically at least, the Republicans are winning. Here's a [recent quote](#) from avowed deficit hawk Mitch McConnell, the Republican [Senate minority leader](#):

The President has said he wants us to 'Win the Future.' But this budget abdicates the future. It spends too much, taxes too much, and borrows too much. It says that the President does not have the will or the ability to do what we need to do with the money that we have. But that's precisely what the Americans are demanding that we do

Well, it's [arguable whether Americans](#) are really demanding major spending cuts, and I'll leave it to [smarter people](#) to explain whether deficit-cutting should really be our top priority. But I find it interesting that conservatives especially are talking about the need for major spending cuts now, lest our children and grandchildren be crushed by the burden of a multi-trillion dollar national debt—and that happens to be very similar to the way that [conservationists talk](#) about climate change and other global environmental challenges. Just as we've been doing for years with public finances, we've been living beyond nature's means, taking more and more from the planet than the planet can provide. There's a term for that, and it's as accurate for conservation as it is for budgeting: unsustainable.

I'm going to explore this idea further in the future, but I can provide one great example from today's AAAS meeting: overfishing. A team of researchers led by Villy Christensen of the [University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre](#) looked at fishing stats [and found that](#) big predatory fish like tuna and cod have declined by more than two-thirds over the past century, while small fish like sardines and anchovies have doubled over the same time period. Of that decline in large fish, 54% took place during the last 40 years, when the big factory fleets really kicked into gear. In an interview with AAAS, Christensen explains what happened in financial terms that should be familiar to those [following the budget wars](#):

The one and dominant reason for the decline is overfishing. Up to the 1970s, industrial fisheries were concentrated in the northern developed countries, but since then it has spread across the globe.

You can think of the fish biomass as our "capital in the bank" (fishing bank if you will). We can draw an interest from that capital every year. That's what we call "sustainable fisheries". But we have been eroding the capital year after year, and we are now left with so small fish stocks that the world catches are smaller now than they were in the 1980.

Christensen says that we're essentially fishing down the food web—removing the large predatory fish, which allows the smaller ones to proliferate undisturbed. But if we keep fishing down that web, eventually using the small fish to feed growing aquaculture operations, that could mean the end of the wild ocean. How fast that would happen is hard to know—the studies range from the [dire](#) to the [more hopeful](#). Christensen's work is part of the [Nereus program](#)—an ambitious initiative to connect data and studies on the fish populations status

from around the world, and hopefully provide better answers for the future of fish.

How can we prevent the collapse of wild fisheries? Pretty much the same way we might try to balance the budget—cut our consumption until we're no longer taking more fish than the sea is providing. So it is for most of our environmental challenges—we need to get out of the red and get into the black. It might be painful at first—but then, so is deficit cutting. Smart businesses and investors who practice "scarcenomics" know this—and so should our deficit hawks on Capitol Hill.