

Meek fish inheriting the oceans, study warns

BY BRADLEY BOUZANE, POSTMEDIA NEWS FEBRUARY 19, 2011



A fisherman hauls out tuna in Zahara de los Atunes, southern Spain. Researchers say the predatory fish population of oceans has dropped by about two-thirds over the past century
Photograph by: Jose Luis Roca, AFP, Getty Images, File, Postmedia News

The overfishing of cod, tuna and other predatory fish has led to a sizable increase in smaller fish that could eliminate the concept of "wild" oceans, turning them into massive farms for aquaculture feed, a team of B.C. scientists warn.

The group from the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre said the predatory fish population has dropped by about two-thirds over the past century, while "forage" fish, such as capelin, sardine and anchovy have increased their stocks by more than 100 per cent.

The researchers call the process "fishing down the food-web," and say it could change the face of the world's oceans, in short order.

"Overfishing has absolutely had a 'when cats are away, the mice will play' effect on our oceans," lead researcher Prof. Villy Christensen said in a statement. "By removing the large, predatory species from the ocean, small forage fish have been left to thrive.

"Currently, forage fish are turned into fish meal and fish oil and used as feeds for the aquaculture industry. . . . If the fishing-down-the-food-web trend continues, our oceans may one day become a farm to produce feeds for the aquaculture industry."

Led by Christensen, a team of scientists used more than 200 marine ecosystem models from around the world and extracted more than 68,000 estimates of fish biomass from 1880 to 2007. The findings were presented Friday at the American Association for the Advancement of Science in Washington.

Christensen discussed the issue in a panel that explored what the world's oceans would be like by 2050. The panel said most fish will be forage species. The scientists also found the bulk of the predatory fish decline -54 per cent -has occurred in the past 40 years.

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