

Have We Seen the End of Overfishing in US Waters?

GoodFood World Staff, January 11th, 2011



Steve Murawski, NOAA
(Retired)

The **Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act**, originally passed in 1976, was put in place to prevent overfishing, to allow overfished stocks to recover, and to conserve and manage fishery resources. The act has been amended and reauthorized a number of times over the last 35 years.

According to Steve Murawski, recently retired chief scientist at the **National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Fisheries Service**, the Magnuson-Stevens Act has been effective. He happily announced that for the first time in the documented history of commercial fishing – going back to 1900 – “We’ve hit the right levels.” He believes that we have seen the end of overfishing in US waters.

Daniel Pauly is a marine biologist studying human impacts on global fisheries and a professor and the project leader of the **Sea Around Us Project** at the **Fisheries Centre** (where he was Director from 2003 to 2008) at the **University of British Columbia**. He is not convinced that we have reached the fishing nirvana Murawski so proudly talks about:

I read the article by Steve Murawski, and I am happy that he is happy.

as it were.

It is true that the US take fisheries management a bit more seriously than European countries, for example, but the US, on the other hand, is very selective as to what it considers a stock, and commercially extinct stocks don't count anyway...

Compared to the European Union, Asian countries, and the rest of the world, “We are the only industrialized fishing nation who actually has succeeded in ending overfishing,” said Murawski.

It's Pauly's research, compiled in his new book, **5 Easy Pieces: The Impact of Fisheries on Marine Ecosystems**, that confirmed that the crisis of fisheries and their underlying ocean ecosystems is, in fact, a global crisis.

GoodFood World asked Dr. Pauly if it is really possible to isolate the US fisheries from the rest of the world when Americans eat from around the world? He responded:

You are right; the importation of fish has displaced the problem, just as it has for pollution from manufacturing. It's now simply outsourced.

According to **an article appearing in Nature in 2002** (one of the “pieces” in Dr. Pauly's book):

Fisheries have rarely been “sustainable.” Rather, fishing has induced serial depletions, long masked by improved technology, geographic expansion and exploitation of previously spurned species lower in the food web.

So have we reached the end of overfishing in the US or have we simply managed to achieve a level of compliance with certain bureaucratic measurements? In short, it appears that we have obeyed the letter of the law without managing to comply with the intent.

From our point of view, the science is the issue; we do not have just reasons to be so happy. The idea that we've reached the right levels of fishing in so short a time appears much too self-serving.

And when one considers all the other serious environmental factors that come into play, Mr. Murawski's assurances are unjustified.

There is *one* North American fishery that has been successfully managed for sustained yield: the Alaska fishery. At **GoodFood World**, we have profiled a small group of fishermen from Sitka Alaska who are carefully and respectfully harvesting salmon, halibut, and lingcod. Follow these fish from Sitka through the supply chain to a supermarket in Puget Sound in **The Tale of Two Fish**.

Share and Recommend:      

 [Features](#)  [Alaska](#), [Daniel Pauly](#), [fish](#), [fishery conservation](#), [NOAA](#), [overfishing](#), [Steven Murawski](#), [sustainable fishery](#)



Daniel Pauly, University of British
Columbia