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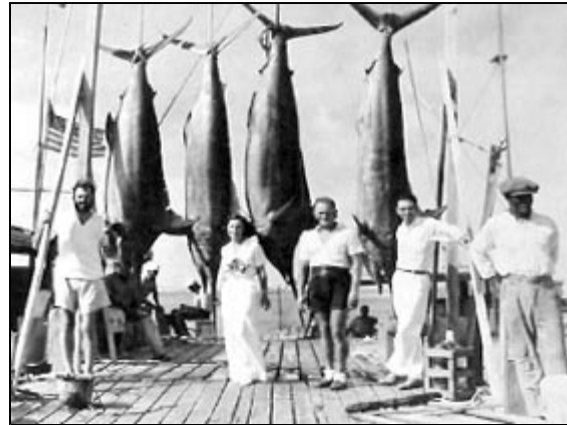
THE NATIONAL

Fished out A new study finds the world has a history of overfishing

Eve Savory, CBC News | May 14, 2003

The world's oceans are losing their biggest fish at an alarming rate.

According to a new study, it takes only 15 years for today's industrial fishery to reduce a fish population by 90 per cent. The study's Canadian authors found that ocean ecosystems around the world have been decimated, with many of the remaining species, such as cod, on the brink of extinction.



People used to catch fish two to five times as big as today's catch

Industrial fishing began about 50 years ago. In the years since, it has brought all the great fish close to extinction.

"The larger species are now largely gone," says Ransom Myers, a fisheries biologist at Dalhousie University. "The most valuable species are now largely gone. This represents an enormous resource that is now depleted to the bare remnants of what it was. Things like the average weight, the change in that is so dramatic."



Myers and colleague Boris Verm asked this question: what were the oceans like before industrial or factory fishes began? What species? How many? How big?

Their research became the cover story of the prestigious journal "Nature" in May 2003. What they found is that the giant fish – the blue-finned tunas, halibut, cod and sharks – have dropped in abundance by 90 per cent. One in ten is left.

"What we've done is sliced the head off of the world marine ecosystems and we don't know the consequences," says Myers. "Where we've done this before, like the cod in Newfoundland, the cod has not recovered. We do not



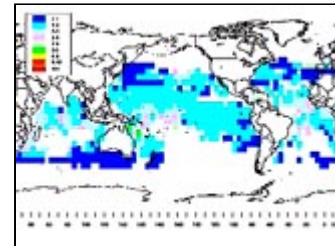
Ransom Myers

understand why. And we're doing this to all the world's ecosystem simultaneously without really keeping track of what's going on."

The researchers looked at two kinds of data: the scientific surveys of things like the Newfoundland cod, but also the open oceans, where the fishery is invisible.

The best way to catch lots of big fish is longlining. Crews put out lines that can run 100 kilometres in length with as many as 2,000 baited hooks. It's how they catch the tuna, swordfish and shark we eat. Myers looked at data from the Japanese longliner fleet, the largest and most efficient in the world. The data showed that from the time fishing began in any area, the numbers of fish caught dropped dramatically to about 10 per cent of the initial haul. Then the boats moved on.

Myers' computer data starts in 1952 near Japan. His computerized map of the world shows how longlining spread across the oceans like a fire, leaving a trail of destruction behind. On the map, dark blue areas are where the catch has plummeted by 90 per cent. In every area, this took just 10 to 15 years.



"We need to vastly reduce the amount of fishing that's occurring in the world's oceans," says Myers. "At every point, we're overexploiting."

And when Myers looked at the weight and size of the catches once recorded, he realized the great fish in decades past were two to five times as big. Today's fish are pygmies by comparison.



"In Newfoundland, if you look at the old historic pictures, they were catching fish the same size they were," says Myers. "They weren't that much smaller than humans. Recent fisheries, like every time you go to the store and you see something funny you've never heard of, like Patagonian tooth fish or Chilean sea bass, when you found this resource, they were typically 50 kilograms.

Now they're much, much smaller, just a few kilograms.

"You see the same thing in Newfoundland. When you see the photos of all these fish that are supposedly in a few little coves in Newfoundland, these are babies. We're fishing babies."

But scarcity has done nothing to slow demand. In Vancouver's Granville market, you can still get Chilean sea bass, marlin and tuna. It seems the main impact of the emptying oceans is: what is left costs more. Other fish, such as swordfish, is hard to come by, according to seafood market owner Scott Moorehead.



A fish market in Vancouver

"In the States, *Gourmet* magazine don't put swordfish recipes in the magazine because of overfishing and lack of supplies," he says. "A lot of the chefs don't have it because it's been overfished over the years."

So as the stocks drop, fishing crews go further afield. Trawls drag a heavy net across the bottom of the ocean, picking up everything. Much of it is bycatch and discarded. The ocean

bottom can be devastated.

"We now have trawlers going down to 2,000 metres, harvesting what is euphemistically called underutilized species, meaning there is some left," says Dalhousie University's Ransom Myers. "You are catching these old fish from deep, unproductive systems with no knowledge of how much you can exploit."

"The point is that our greed is limitless. Our demands are limitless," says professor Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia fisheries centre. He says that historically, whenever a new fishery was discovered, within a decade they had to quit because it was gone. Then, he says, the fisheries' managers arrive.



Daniel Pauly

"Management in expanding fisheries is always developing new ways of closing barns out of which the horses have long escaped," says Pauly. "In a sense, fisheries management is decorating the barn door, having bigger locks, triple locks and quadruple locks, but the horse is gone..."



Pauly and Myers say life on land is better protected than aquatic life

Pauly and Myers say at least on land we can see what we had. We value the top predators for more than their meat. We set aside ecological reserves.

"We don't have such reserves in the ocean," says Myers. "We have exploited every corner of the ocean except for little, little bits that are under the arctic ice caps or little areas that have been protected. We have lost and we're not protecting the great biodiversity of the oceans, and we're not protecting the large species. Again, whether they're groupers in the tropics or giant blue marlin or Antarctic ice fish, when Antarctic ice fish are overfished, you know there's not much left."

The odds are the world will lose these magnificent animals and the fishing communities that depend on them. But Myers thinks there is hope.

He says people saved the whales and stopped driftnet fishing. If they care enough, he believes the great fish of just a few decades ago still have a chance.

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