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Questionable agreements

The United Nations' Convention on Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), in the 1970s, enabled countries to claim Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and made the maritime countries responsible for managing their EEZ. Unfortunately, this opportunity was lost by most countries: governments (as in the USA, or Canada) subsidized the growth of national fleets substituting for the just displaced DWF of foreign countries, or the DWF came back through often bargain-priced «fishing agreements», e.g., between the European Union and West African countries.

Should I stress that these agreements, and the even more questionable deals allowing DWF from Asia to fish in West Africa contribute neither to food security in that region, nor to its development? Or that this is part of a broad pattern of countries in the South providing much of the fish now consumed in the developed North?

Post-UNCLOS technological and geographic expansions extended the trend of catch increase, if at a slower rate, and soon started to stagnate. Global catches began to decline in the late 1980s, an important trend reversal that was long masked by systematic over-reporting by China.

High time for implementing reforms

Given this, and a number of associated trends involving biomass declines, loss of biodiversity, and indeed, the collapse of many of the ecosystems in which fisheries are embedded, it is now urgent to implement the reforms earlier proposed by fisheries scientists and economists: to radically reduce fishing capacity, notably by abolishing the government subsidies that keep otherwise unprofitable fleets afloat, and to phase out destructive fishing gear such as bottom trawls.

There are, as well, suggestions that aquaculture should be able to compensate for the decline of fisheries, or even «feed the world». However, many common aquaculture practices are unsustainable: they consume natural resources at a very high rate (fresh water, coastal mangrove forests), and are extremely vulnerable to the pollution and disease outbreaks they induce. Moreover, much of what is meant by aquaculture, at least in the developed world, consist of feedlot operations in which carnivorous fish (mainly salmon) are fattened on a diet rich in fish meal and oil. Such operations consume much more fish biomass than they produce, and hence cannot «replace» fisheries. Rather, they stress them even more. Indeed, neither aquaculture, nor traditional fisheries management measures will be sufficient to prevent the fisheries-induced disappearance of large predatory fish species. To prevent this, we must re-establish the refugia earlier fish populations enjoyed, and which made it possible for some of our earlier fisheries to last for centuries, although they were not regulated.

These refugia, that is marine reserves will have to be perceived not as concessions to conservationist pressure, but as a legitimate and obvious management tool, required for preventing the entire distribution area of various exploited species from being accessible to fishing.

There is an alternative to this, obviously. It is that we lose more fisheries, that global fisheries catches decline further (with devastating impacts on food security in the developing world), and that, in the process, we also lose many of the species upon which our fisheries have so far depended.

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