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**HEADLINE:** In Brussels, They Can't See The Shoal For The Fish

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**BODY:**

The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat By Charles Clover Ebury, 314pp Pounds 14.99 and Pounds 7.99 ISBN 0 09 189780 7 and 189781 5

It has become clear lately -at least to some -that the earth's resources will not for ever accommodate our profligate ways and that something will have to give. Whether cheap oil, water or soils, our use of these precious commodities is unsustainable and some serious accounting will come. (Why is it that one cannot write about such things without sounding like a Sunday-school teacher?) The metaphor of choice is Easter Island. This enigmatic island, littered with giant statues, was deforested by its inhabitants, who used logs to transport the statues. When the trees were gone, the islanders carved even larger statues, which were expected somehow to move themselves into position. When they, as statues do, failed to move, the islanders went on the rampage, killing one another, burning the remaining wood and overturning the unthankful statues before beginning a century-long descent into destitution (because without trees, there was no means to make boats and, hence, of obtaining seafood, their main source of subsistence). This behaviour may be called misguided or even tragic, but one could also describe this as S.T.U.P.I.D. It is one thing to be faced with a difficult ecological problem -say, decreased wheat harvest due to increased salinisation -but trees? Easter Island is small enough that the man who felled the last tree must have seen that it was the last.

The End of the Line is an account of the Common Fisheries Policy, run by the European Commission, and it puts Brussels where it belongs, on Easter Island. As Charles Clover says: "The lunatics have taken over the asylum."

One does not know where to begin: Clover details the scandals of illegal fishing, now a massive industry, our own Medellin cartel right in Europe.

He describes the massacre of dolphins and other protected marine mammals by fishermen who hack them out of their nets; the huge subsidies doled out to the fishing industry; attempts at conservation by European Union scientists who end up ignored, with Brussels-in-Easter-Island issuing quotas that drive one stock after another into oblivion. It is even true that the fleet decommissioning subsidies, nominally meant to reduce fleet sizes, end up fuelling fleet modernisation, as the money paid out for retiring one's boat can serve as collateral for the next.

Clover also tells us of the Atlantic Dawn, the largest fishing vessel built, which first operated in EU waters without a fishing licence -an intervention by the Irish Prime Minister did the job -before it was deployed in West Africa, where it is now part of the EU fleet that is liquidating what is left of the region's previously abundant resources. The Irish Times of December 4, 2004 tells us that it is making a killing in the process.

In fact, don't get Clover started on West African fisheries, or those in eastern Canada, or even about those fishing around Antarctica. Here, as in Europe, the data are unequivocal: the fish stock are subjected to

excessive fishing -legally or not -so that their abundance declines, all the way into commercial and, soon, biological extinction. These things are known, and the problem is that in most countries, including those of the EU, politicians are too craven to face the fishing industry.

But Clover heaps the greatest scorn on celebrity chefs, of which he names several. They emphasise their commitment to sustainability and claim to serve fish caught from well-managed fisheries. Yet when he asked how their fish is sourced, he elicited evasive answers or none at all. Clover's conclusion that these cooks are missing an opportunity is, however, mistaken. It is difficult to imagine that one could manage fisheries with our stomachs, that is to say, without primarily involving our brain and indeed our heart. The list of fish provided in the appendix that are classified as appropriate for consumption thus could have been omitted. In fact, it is jarring in the context of such an indictment of the fishing industry.

Nevertheless, I found little to disagree with in this book. In fact, the only technical error I found was not in my field, fisheries science, but in one of my avocations, linguistics. Clover, carried away by the beauty of the Newfoundland landscape, suggests that the bakeapple (*Rubus chamaemorus*, also known as cloudberry) got its name from the French "Baie qu'appelle", which, he says, means "what is this berry called?". As a Frenchman, I know this must be Easter Island French. Clover has mis-googled himself (French: il s'est megoogle). The actual origin of the word is Inuktitut (Eskimo).

Getting back to serious matters: it would be nice if one could say that Clover's account of European and world fisheries was exaggerated.

Unfortunately, it is not. It shows, rather, what good journalism can do and what scientists cannot. It is entertaining, outrageous and a must-read for anyone cares about the sea and its denizens, or even about our supply of seafood. Perhaps we can reverse the trends because at present, "the only political influence over the sea's bounty is exacted by an industry -the wild capture fishing industry -which in Britain is roughly the size of the lawnmower industry. No one would dream of allowing the lawnmower industry to dictate the policy of a sovereign state." For this to happen, however, we have to realise that we are all Easter Islanders, and that there are only a few trees left.

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**Document 1 of 1.**

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