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North Atlantic Study Claims Food Fish Catches Have Declined by Half Despite Tripled Fishing Effort...

The catch of species such as cod, tuna, haddock, flounder, and hake, has decreased in the north Atlantic by more than half over the last fifty years despite a tripling in fishing effort. So said the authors of a recent survey, presenting their findings at the AAAS meeting in Boston.

"The only way we are maintaining yield is by increasing effort," said Dr. Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre. "But you need fish to make fish, and so we have created a massive reduction in productivity."

While disastrous collapses in areas like New England and Newfoundland have appeared to be local in scale, the new synthesis reveals, said its authors, that the collapse applies to the entire north Atlantic Ocean.

"You may think we are making headway with a few individual stocks, but overall we are unequivocally losing the battle to manage fisheries in the north Atlantic," said Pauly. "Unless you have both long term and large spatial scales, as we have mapped, you cannot see the big picture. The problem is profound at an ocean-wide scale."

The researchers' analysis of the state of the north Atlantic also examines the gross economic figures as well as the fisheries subsidies and fuel consumed in search of fish. "Approximately 2.5 billion dollars of tax-payers' money are spent each year subsidizing fishing fleets which spend the money on ever augmenting their technological ability to search out the last fish left," said economist Rashid Sumaila of the Chr. Michelsen Institute in Bergen, Norway. "The national and international institutions mandated to control and to prevent the growth of excessive fishing effort have largely failed in their mission," said Pauly. "Our study shows this."

"Policy has followed a fishery by fishery approach. It doesn't work," claimed Andy Rosenberg, a dean and fisheries scientist at the University of New Hampshire and former deputy director of the National Marine Fishery Service. "You can't fix this one fishery at a time, because the boats just move around - the effort simply shifts to somewhere else and makes their problems worse."

"The necessary next steps are substantial reduction of fishing fleets, reduction and eventual abolition of subsidies to industrial fisheries, and unavoidably, the establishment of networks of "no-take" marine reserves: to replenish the oceans' depleted resources and to restore productivity," said Pauly. "In order to restore productivity to a fishery, the broader ecosystem with its many parts needs to be conserved."

"The only solution is serious and immediate action to reduce the number of boats and to work towards a basin wide ecosystem approach that considers all species," concluded Rosenberg. "Systematically we have a huge problem. We can't keep addressing this one symptom at a time."

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