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Deep-sea trawling neither green nor profitable

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- **Catherine Brahic**

Deep-sea trawling is neither environmentally nor even economically sound, says an international team of fisheries experts. They are calling for government fuel subsidies to be eliminated in order to end the practice.

The team, bringing together economists, biologists and ecologists, was speaking at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science on 17 February, in San Francisco, US.

Among them, Rashid Sumaila and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Canada recently studied the subsidies paid to bottom trawl fleets around the world. They found that the fleets receive over \$152 million each year and that without these funds, the deep-sea fisheries industry would operate at a \$50 million annual loss.

"From an ecological perspective we cannot afford to destroy the deep-sea," says Sumaila. "From an economic perspective, deep-sea fisheries cannot occur without government subsidies. The bottom line is that current deep fisheries are not sustainable."

Pauly adds: "There is surely a better way for governments to spend money than by paying subsidies to a fleet that burns 1.1 billion litres of fuel annually to maintain paltry catches of old growth fish from highly vulnerable stocks, while destroying their habitat in the process."

Heavy net

According to Sumaila and Pauly, the governments who pay subsidies to their bottom trawl fleets are: Japan, South Korea, Russia, Spain, Australia, Ukraine, Faroe Islands, Estonia, Iceland, Lithuania, Estonia, Latvia and France.

The team say the fishing industry has been driven to trawling the bottom of high seas because of depleted coastal fish stocks. There is concern that because they fish in international waters, their activities are largely unregulated. Moreover, the techniques used – essentially dragging a heavy net across the sea floor more than a mile beneath the surface – are destructive. Catches also tend to include old-growth fish, which only slowly replenish their stocks.

Krista Baker of Memorial University in Canada gives the example of orange roughy. These are fished in the Northeast and Southeast Atlantic, South Pacific and Indian Ocean. "When you buy orange roughy you are likely eating a fish that is at least 50 years old," says Baker. "Some can be as old as 150, which means you could be eating a fish that was born when Lincoln was president."

On 8 December 2006, the UN called on nations that have high seas fishing fleets to declare out-of-bounds areas that are home to vulnerable species such as deep-sea corals, sponges, unless they can prove that the fishing will cause no harm. Many countries were in favour of a moratorium on unregulated trawl fishing but this was opposed by Canada,

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Iceland, Japan and Russia.

The new UN agreement mirrors the requirements placed on the oil industry, but Murray Roberts of the Scottish Association for Marine Science, and one of the study team, told **New Scientist**: "We don't know how it's going to play out yet".

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