

Where Have All the Fish Gone?

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The collapse of America's West Coast Salmon fishery has an eerily familiar ring to it. Are the oceans dying?

Ocean fisheries could be facing collapse. Ninety years of methodical, mechanized overfishing have left many of the world's most productive fishing zones dead, dying or on the edge of ecological disintegration. Industrialized fishing and poor environmental stewardship are in the process of destroying the planet's biggest resource—its oceans.

When explorer John Cabot discovered mainland North America in 1497—touching down in what is probably Newfoundland or Labrador today—he made a resource discovery that would change the world forever. He found a food source that would eventually foster in the tiny island nation of England the wealth, skills and shipbuilding capacity that would help transform it into a global empire. What Cabot discovered was the most fantastic fishing grounds the world has ever seen. He found waters so overflowing with ocean life that whole provinces of the New World were settled just to harvest its seemingly limitless bounty.

When Cabot returned with stories of the Grand Banks, where cod appeared so thick that a person “could walk across their backs” and be caught by just scooping them out of the water with wicker baskets, the news sparked a mania. The North West Atlantic fishery was born, and so was an industry that would help feed the world for centuries to come.

Today, the Grand Banks are fished out. The cod are gone, and so are the commercial stocks of flounder, Greenland halibut, and redfish. And now, according to federal authorities, the West Coast Salmon fishery may be severely threatened too.

On May 1, U.S. federal authorities declared the West Coast ocean salmon fishery a disaster. The declaration opened the way for Congress to provide economic aid for California, Oregon and Washington.

The declaration stemmed from the sudden collapse of the Chinook salmon in California's Sacramento River. According to the *National Post*, the closure of both the commercial and recreational Chinook salmon fishery was the *first in 160 years*.

But unfortunately, the Sacramento River system is not alone. Fisheries up and down the U.S. West Coast are experiencing similar conditions, as few fish seem to be returning to the rivers to spawn. As reported by Newsday.com, only 60,000 salmon are expected to return to the Sacramento River this year—less than half the minimum that fishery managers say are required to ensure the next generation. At one time, more than 750,000 fish were returning on an annual basis.

“It breaks my heart to report this,” says author and fisheries sustainability expert Alex Rose. “I believe we are at the tipping point. The Pacific salmon fishery may very well go the way of the Grand Banks cod.”

Further north, in the Strait of Georgia, sports fishermen used to hook an astounding *1 million* coho salmon per year. But by 2000, anglers were only pulling in a paltry 10,000. If that doesn't sound like a collapse, what does? Rose says that he is no “doom and gloom person,” but for the first time he can envision a day when the wild salmon in the Strait go extinct.

“[T]here are so many eerie and ominous parallels” with the Grand Banks, he says. “[I]n a generation we've gone from unbelievable abundance to a crisis.”

Salmon numbers have dropped so precipitously that Washington and Oregon have even commenced a sea lion

relocation and extermination program designed to reduce predation pressure on remaining salmon stocks.

But America is not alone in its fishing problems. Collapsing fisheries are becoming common in other parts of the world.

Last November, Reuters published a study from Australia's Lowy Institute saying that the livelihoods of 100 million people were at risk in Southeast Asia due to the overfishing of local waters. Gulf of Thailand fish density had reportedly declined by 86 percent from 1991 to 1996; by 1994, the catch per hour had reduced to one seventh. In the Gulf of Tonkin, the sea body shared by Vietnam and China, the catch per hour in 1997 was only one quarter of the catch in 1985. In southern Vietnamese waters, the total fishing haul between 1981 and 1999 doubled, but to accomplish that, it took a tripling of the existing fishing fleet—a sure sign those fisheries are nearing maximum capacity, according to the Lowy Institute report. Waters off the coast of the Philippines by the 1980s were only producing 10 percent of former levels.

And when one area gets fished out, the thousands of deep-sea fishing vessels just move to the next.

“From giant blue marlin to mighty bluefin tuna, and from tropical groupers to Antarctic cod, industrial fishing has scoured the global ocean. There is no blue frontier left,” says author Ransom Meyers, a world-leading fisheries biologist based at Dalhousie University in Canada. “Since 1950, with the onset of industrialized fisheries, we have rapidly reduced the resource base to less than 10 percent—not just for some stocks, but for entire communities of these large fish species from the tropics to the poles.” Bluefin tuna, once plentiful, are now so rare that this year a Hong Kong-based trader bought one fish for about the same price as a top-of-the-range Mercedes. On the Tokyo market, one fish can sell for \$150,000.

When you pay \$150,000 for one fish, it is a good indication that it is so rare that it could probably go extinct. But still people go on with business as usual, supporting the destruction of an entire species. Just a few years ago, scientists warned that large predatory fish species had been depleted by as much as 99 percent over the past century.

Dr. Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Center at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada, also sees a looming problem. He says the world may be reaching what is referred to as “Peak Fish.” Peak Fish is a term describing the fact that the biomass, or total weight, of fish caught from the world's oceans reached a maximum in the late 1980s. Since then, Dr. Pauly says, despite increasing technology and more advanced fishing methods, the global fish haul has been flat or sinking.

“There's no doubt about this,” says Pauly, whose findings have been published in *Science and Nature* and other world-leading peer-reviewed publications. “We're in a phase where increasing fishing effort produces less catch.”

The United Nations fisheries and aquaculture department report titled “The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2006” seems to confirm the Lowry Institute's findings. This report says:

- One quarter of the world's fish are either overexploited or depleted (17 percent, 7 percent respectively). These stocks are at risk of further declines and are yielding less than their maximum potential due to overfishing.
- Over half of world fish stocks (52 percent) are fully exploited and therefore producing catches that are at or close to their maximum sustainable limit, with no room for further expansion.
- Twenty percent of fish groups are moderately exploited.
- Three percent of fish stocks are underexploited and could perhaps yield significantly more fish in the future.
- One percent of global stocks are recovering from depletion.

The UN report doesn't paint a pretty picture, but it is a picture that could eventually affect all of us.

When you start removing multiple fish species, it seems obvious there will be consequences. Ecological communities are a balancing act of symbiotic organisms that rely upon each other. Remove one species from the food web and the community may be able to adjust—other organisms may be able to take up the slack and fill the missing niche. But all it takes is the destruction of one too many species and the whole ecosystem may come tumbling down.

Just look at the Grand Banks. For 500 years, the Atlantic cod was one of the great natural wonders of the world. Then, during the 1990s, the stocks catastrophically collapsed—and still as of today there is little to no evidence of any return of the fish. Once species dip below a certain critical level, scientists believe that stocks may never recover because the entire ecosystem is altered.

Unfortunately, the reality is that mankind seems to mismanage just about everything it puts its hands to. Yes, increasing knowledge and advancing technology have led to increased fish captures, food consumption and living standards for many of the world's people. Advanced sonar, GPS-driven, computerized oceangoing behemoths have learned to efficiently comb the seas and maximize fish capture—but at what cost? Have we sacrificed our future food supply for short-term abundance?

What a paradox. Increasing knowledge and scientific advancement not only isn't keeping current problems in check, it is helping create new ones. We build bigger, more efficient ships to capture more fish to feed the world, and we end up destroying our fisheries.

Herbert W. Armstrong, in an August/September 1970 *Plain Truth* article, referred to this paradox: "Knowledge production is supposed to be the way to cure all our evils. Given sufficient knowledge, the great minds have assured us, we shall have the solution to all humanity's problems, ills and evils."

But more knowledge is not solving the world's problems. The world's fisheries are a sad example—greater technology is just helping humankind damage the environment faster than ever.

Unfortunately, overexploitation of resources and the destruction of the environment is the story of mankind—it is the story of the cod, our forests and soils, our fresh water—and if things don't change, it will be the story of the oceans.

For the solution to this paradox, read Herbert Armstrong's book *The Incredible Human Potential and Education With Vision*. •

Robert Morley's column appears every Tuesday.

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