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Tricks of the trade

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Can the world stop governments from paying for the over-exploitation of fish?

OVERFISHING erodes future prosperity by destroying today a resource that could yield benefits indefinitely. Yet it is subsidised by billions of taxpayer dollars, euros and yen. Now a new chance to halt this insanity has emerged in the unlikely form of climate-change negotiations.

Landlubbers hand pots of money to fishermen. [Rashid Sumaila](#), a researcher at the University of British Columbia, estimates that in 2003 (the most recent year for which data are available), the world's fishing subsidies were \$25 billion-30 billion. The value of fish landed in the same year was \$82 billion. Furthermore, Dr Sumaila reckons that \$16 billion of the subsidies either promote overcapacity by helping fishermen buy new or bigger boats or encourage overfishing by subsidising fuel.

AFP



In theory, this problem could be sorted out by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). But the issue has languished over the years and the current Doha round of trade negotiations remains moribund. [Oceana](#), an environmental pressure group, argues that the subsidy of fisheries should now be "decoupled" from the Doha round.

[Victor do Prado](#), deputy chief of staff at the WTO, thinks the chances of that happening are slim. "Fisheries is part of the overall Doha mandate," he says. "As long as this issue is treated within the WTO it is difficult to decouple it from the rest of the round dossiers. What would countries like Japan and Korea be gaining by decoupling?" In other words, a global deal on fisheries subsidies is unlikely because countries such as China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan and Spain—all of which have large fishing fleets—do not want to cut subsidies.

Moreover, Mr do Prado argues that his organisation is the only one that could broker a deal. "The advantage of negotiating within the WTO is that nothing is agreed until everything is agreed," he says. "Trade-offs in one area may mean that some countries will give in on another area. And if you don't discuss fisheries subsidies within WTO where else are you going to do it?"

Yet the global fate of fisheries does not entirely hang on a stalled trade agreement. That is because, in the run-up to the United Nations Climate Change Conference taking place next month in Copenhagen, fuel subsidies are on the political agenda. Fisheries account for 1.2% of global oil consumption and emit more than 130m tonnes of carbon dioxide a year. That makes the industry similar in scale to the Netherlands, the 18th-most prolific oil-consuming country.

On September 25th leaders of the G20 group of countries said they would phase out fossil-fuel subsidies in the "medium term". So unless the world's fishing fleets convert to biofuels, there may be some hope for dealing with the subsidy of overfishing. As for fleet overcapacity, that would appear to remain within the remit of the WTO. Efforts to address it should be redoubled. That is because, in subsidising unsustainable practices, governments are promoting a licensed form of theft by one generation from the next.

The recent banking crisis has so far swallowed about \$3 trillion dollars and caused great outrage. Over the past decade, fishing subsidies have cost \$250 billion. If there were only a twelfth of the outcry, your correspondent suspects that the practice would be halted.