

# A Desert In The Ocean

Over the past century, two-thirds of the large predator fish in the ocean have been caught and consumed by humans. In the decades ahead the rest are likely to perish too.

Small fish such as anchovies and gobies are flourishing in the absence of the tuna, grouper and cod that feed on them, creating an ecological imbalance experts say will change the oceans. "Think of it like the Serengeti, with lions and the antelopes they feed on," said Villy Christensen, of

University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre. "When all the lions are gone, there will be antelopes everywhere. Our oceans are losing their lions and pretty soon will have nothing but antelopes." This grim reckoning was presented at the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting recently. The panel predicted that while there would be fish decades from now, they will be primarily the smaller varieties currently used as fish oil, fish meal for farmed fish and only infrequently as food for humans.

More than half the decrease in large predator fish has taken place over the past 40 years. Most of the catch involves East Asia, which has witnessed dramatic economic growth. Jacqueline Alder, from the UN Environment Program, suggested the number of fishing boats and days they fish have to be restricted. "That will give an opportunity for the fish stocks to rebuild and expand their populations," she said. Christensen gave an example of what he expects to see more in the oceans. Some years ago, a huge sardine fishery off Namibia in southern Africa crashed because of overfishing and a related drop in oxygen in the waters.

When the sardines are depleted, he said, anchovies move in. Both can be consumed, but sardines bring a higher price and so are preferred. Fishing fleets worked toward reducing the anchovy population, hoping sardines would come back. Instead, the fish that moved into the niche was the bearded goby – which is inedible for humans and eats up ocean food that might have supported sardines or anchovies. "Nobody," Christensen said, "can control the ocean."

*Villy Christensen  
Images: Mick Hollis*

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