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N. Atlantic fish stocks fading, study finds

By Beth Daley, Globe Staff, 2/17/2002

New England's fabled cod and haddock, along with many other fish species, will all but disappear within a decade from the North Atlantic if drastic measures aren't taken to stop overfishing, according to one of the most comprehensive reviews of fishing ever conducted.

While some New England fish species seem to be increasing in numbers, the report, funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts and released yesterday in Boston, said their recovery is not telling the whole story: North Atlantic fish stocks are so depleted that there are barely enough mature fish to produce another generation.

The collapse of fish populations is occurring, said the study, because the population of fish that people eat diminishes while commercial fishing rises.

The North Atlantic has about one-sixth the number of fish it had in 1900 and is being fished eight times as intensively, scientists say. Fishermen are also chasing species ever lower on the food chain as bigger fish are depleted.

"With few exceptions, we are going to lose most fisheries in the next decade if we don't quickly mend our ways," said Daniel Pauly, a University of British Columbia scientist who headed the study. The group announced its results at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science.

"It may sound like a doomsday scenario, but the decline is actually accelerating. Even where stocks are doing better, they are still hovering at the bottom of a pit," Pauly said.

The group of 10 scientists and about 50 consultants undertook the 21/2-year analysis after becoming frustrated by the lack of any oceanwide fisheries information. The group is composed of fishery scientists, biologists, and economists from research institutions in Europe and North America.

Most researchers and regulators tend to focus on only one species or geographical area and little of the information has been pieced together.

The scientists, however, did just that, synthesizing millions of numbers regarding fish species, catches, and populations over generations to come up with a model of the North Atlantic.

While the scientists do not have any power to make policy, their study is expected to weigh heavily with regulators as decisions are made in coming months to further protect New England's fish.

Their proposed solutions are sure to be considered drastic by many fishermen:

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Thousands of square miles set aside as "no-take" zones where fish are as protected as bears are in a national park; large reductions in fishing fleets; and abolition of most subsidies to industrial fishing fleets.

Fishermen, many of whom say stocks aren't nearly as imperiled as scientists claim, have faced increasing restrictions in the last seven years as regulators attempt to rebuild scallop, flounder, and other species off New England. A patchwork of closures, limited fishing days, and fishing gear that let more fish escape are now in place.

Just in the last year, the effort seemed to pay off with the re-opening of some scallop beds and cod so plentiful lobstermen were pulling them up in traps.

"It is unbelievable to suggest the stocks are about to vanish," said David Bergeron, coordinator of the Massachusetts Fishermen's Partnership, an association of state fishing groups. "There are more fish out there now than there has been in a generation. We already have so many closures [of areas to fishing]; how many more do they want?"

Once, fishing off New England's coast was the stuff of legend. Georges Bank, an ancient submerged island, was considered one of the most important fishing areas in the world. Cod, haddock, herring, clams, and lobsters thrived there. Europeans came to Massachusetts in part for the cod, and until the 1990s the supply seemed limitless.

But overfishing led to one fishery after another in the 1990s being declared exhausted. After cod and haddock were fished out, fishermen began harvesting "trash fish" they used to throw away, such as the spiny dogfish. Britain created a hot market for that whitefish, using it in fish and chip dinners.

Soon, however, those stocks also collapsed, and federal regulators came under fire for not doing their job to help all fish populations' recovery. Last month, US District Judge Gladys Kessler ruled regulators weren't doing enough to prevent overfishing, a finding that could lead to further restrictions.

Authors of the new study echoed the judge, saying regulators have "largely failed" to prevent overfishing in large part because they looked at fishing as a problem of individual species, not an oceanwide one.

"That's essentially moving around the deck chairs on the Titanic," said Andy Rosenberg, a University of New Hampshire dean who spearheaded the partial fishing closures on Georges Bank when he worked for the National Marine Fisheries Services.

In the last 50 years, the catch of popular fish species such as cod, tuna, and haddock has decreased by more than half despite a tripling in fishing across the North Atlantic, the study found. It is not just that there are more boats; sophisticated technology also makes the fish easier to catch. Countries spend \$2.5 billion in taxpayer's money each year to "search out the last fish left," in the North Atlantic, said Rashid Sumaila of the Michelsen Institute in Norway, who conducted an economic analysis as part of the study.

At the same time, fish gets more expensive every year, he noted. US seafood prices, especially for lobsters and shrimp, have increased 20-fold since 1950. New Englanders can continue to eat their favorite fish because much of the seafood is imported from developing countries, a practice that the scientists said should not be allowed to continue.

The National Marine Fisheries Service, one of the prime regulators of fishermen, declined to comment on the report, saying it had not yet seen it. However, Mike Sissenwine, director of the agency's Northeast Fishery Science Center, agreed regulators usually have not pushed for more stringent fishing restrictions because of "economic and social backlash" from the public.

The scientists yesterday said regulators must ignore political and social pressure and do what is best for the ocean. They suggest that many incentives and government aid for fishermen, whether a break on fuel tax or money for new boats, be abolished.

But it's the idea of creating large protected areas of the ocean that will upset fishermen most. While the report's scientists were unsure how large the "no-take" zones should be, they agreed each needed several thousand square miles to be effective.

"It's just like creating a park," said Rosenberg. "The areas have to be large so you can get a vibrant habitat. That's just the reality of it."

While closures do exist in the Gulf of Maine and on Georges Bank, the scientists said they are too small.

Worldwide, less than 1 percent of ocean waters have such protection, according to the Conservation Law Foundation and other environmental agencies. That group and others recently conducted a poll that found 74 percent of New Englanders support protected zones.

But Pauly said that such closures work only if done in tandem with reductions in fishing pressure. And he warned against the urge to reopen closed areas after stocks make initial recoveries.

"We rebuild it again, reopen it, and then we fish it again," said Pauly. For example, he said, while New England cod stocks are larger than they were 10 years ago, they are still dramatically lower than in the 1960s.

"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. "The problem is profound at an ocean-wide level."

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