EU's fish crisis: The dark night of the shoal

by Richard Ingham and Annick Chapoy

PARIS, May 29 (AFP) - Politicians may rant about plans to slash the European Union's fishing fleet, but for scientists the biological facts are bald and not worth a moment's wrangle.

The simple truth is this:

Decades of over-fishing have ravaged stocks in the Mediterranean, North Sea and Baltic while parts of the North Atlantic, Europe's principal fishery, could collapse within years.

Doomsday in the North Atlantic may come as soon as 2010, according to scientists at the University of British Columbia, who earlier this year published the first comprehensive survey of the fishery.

Since 1950, catches in the North Atlantic have fallen by half, yet the effort that has gone into catching them has tripled, the study said.

The numbers of quality specimens, "table fish" such as large cod, tuna and halibut that will provide a decent steak, has plunged even more dramatically -- by 85 percent since 1900.

Stocks of these adult-sized specimens were abundant in the North Sea, the Northeastern Atlantic and the Azores in the 1950s. Today, significant commercial quantities of table fish now only exist in a small area around Canada's Grand Banks.

That has left trawlermen to scoop up tomorrow's breeding stock -- small, immature fish that are turned into fish fingers, fish paste or ground up into food for, ironically, fish farms.

At this rate, "we'll all be eating jellyfish sandwiches," one of the authors, Reg Watson, said wryly in a presentation of the survey at a meeting in Washington.

About a dozen European agencies are involved in the scientific end of fisheries.

They provide input for the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICEM), an agency that assesses the health of between 120 and 150 fishing areas in the Atlantic, Baltic and Mediterranean.

ICEM, in turn, gives its opinion to the EU's executive Commission, whose plan for the fishing industry was announced on Tuesday, triggering a political storm.

"Biomass is the basics of our job -- to understand what's left in the sea after the fishing and estimate what can be caught in the following years," said Loic Antoine, head of the fishing resources department at the French oceanographic research agency IFREMER in Nantes, western France.

"We measure the size and age of the fish that are caught, the effort that has gone into catching them, in other words, the time spent compared to the catch itself. The quantity of fish left in the sea is directly proportional to what is landed."

Underpinning the numbers is a vast scientific realm -- from research into the food chain and the life cycle of commercial species to ocean currents and thermals and fishing techniques, such as the mesh size of trawler nets.

The logic of sustainable development is that less is more.

By slashing their catches today, trawlermen eventually can haul in a bigger harvest.

It takes time, though.

What scientists have discovered is that once stocks of adult fish plunge below a certain threshold, it takes years for a fishery to recover, even if countries rigorously respect low quotas.

A 2000 Canadian study of 90 seriously overfished areas in the North Sea and Atlantic found that 41 percent were still below par 15 years later.

Another 51 percent had showed some signs of recovery, but only eight percent had fully recovered.

Cod, haddock and flatfish were especially hit, but herring bounced back quickly -- a clear sign that fishery management had failed to take into account the age of sexual maturity among species and their rate of reproduction.

The Commission plans mark a departure from the EU's usual strategy. Instead of once-year haggling to divide up the overall catch into national quotas, it proposes "multi-annual catch targets within safe biological limits."

Public subsidies to the fishing industry would be scrapped and trawler owners given financial help to scrap their vessels under an 820-million-euro (755-million-dollar) scheme.

If the scheme is adopted, that could put an end to a 15-year charade in which fisheries ministers have set higher catches than scientists have recommended.

But it is a big "if", given the jobs, investment and national prestige at stake.

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