

Fish stocks face global collapse

By Clive Cookson in Boston

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Marine scientists are warning of a catastrophic collapse in global fish stocks. The American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in Boston heard of several studies showing that ocean ecosystems are in a far worse state than researchers had realised two or three years ago.

Fisheries are already collapsing across the entire North Atlantic, according to an international study using new ocean-wide mapping techniques. The productivity of the ocean is six times less than 50 years ago, but fishing effort is three times greater than in 1950, while the catch has fallen by more than half.

Although disastrous collapses in individual areas such as Newfoundland and the North Sea had appeared local in nature, "the problem is in fact profound at an ocean-wide scale", said Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre in Canada, who headed the project. "We are primarily fishing for species we once considered bait - and are headed for jellyfish."

His colleague Reg Watson said large fish in North American and European markets were increasingly being imported from the developing world, "masking our own crisis - we are paying fishers in other oceans to grind down their marine ecosystems for our consumption," he said.

The fishing industry is also trying to make up for the depletion of traditional shallow water fisheries by intensive deep-sea trawling with disastrous results, according to Callum Roberts of York University in the UK. Deep-sea trawling was doubly damaging, he said.

Firstly, it scooped up slow-growing species such as rockfish and orange roughy, which live for 150 to 200 years, at wholly unsustainable rates. Secondly, communities of deep-water corals were being destroyed as trawl nets scraped the ocean floor. Dr Roberts wants the practice, which he calls "fish mining", to be phased out.

Fisheries scientists say the overfishing problem is becoming worse as fishers use new technologies to hunt down fish. The only solution, Dr Pauly said, was international agreement to cut fishing fleets very substantially, end subsidies for industrial fishing and establish a global network of marine reserves.



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