

Declining fish stocks demand urgent action

To leave marine deserts would be a sin against our children

The North Atlantic's main fish stocks could disappear if fisheries policies don't change soon, top ocean scientists warned a Boston conference last week. While the situation's not quite so grim on the North Pacific, prudence demands that we heed the warning here, too.

True, ocean conditions we don't fully understand are responsible for some West Coast stock declines. But some were depleted because of preventable habitat destruction, others by flawed, management strategies.

And the same federal fisheries bureaucracy that presided over the tragedy of East Coast cod was in charge here while once-vast salmon runs dwindled and groundfish stocks in the Strait of Georgia slipped into a decline from which some species may never recover.

One lead scientist on this troubling North Atlantic study is Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia. He warns that on the East Coast, despite successful efforts to save some individual fisheries, the over-all battle is being lost.

Important North Atlantic stocks of cod, tuna, haddock, flounder and hake have all fallen by more than 50 percent in the past five decades. Those statistics offer a chilling foreshadowing of what's happening here, where some formerly rich salmon runs are teetering at the brink of extinction while others are a shadow of their former abundance. It's thought by some that the Fraser River once produced 150 million salmon in a peak year. Now a return of 15 million is considered impressive. And on some streams in the Thompson system, biologists would be happy with a single pair of spawning coho.

As in the increasingly barren North Atlantic, the Pacific fishery has been managed in ways that offered a structural incentive to catch as many fish as possible before competitors did. The result was a concentration of killing capacity directed at mixed stocks where weak runs intermingled with strong ones. Whole genetic strains from smaller rivers could be wiped out in a few boats' attempts to maximize the yield from more abundant runs bound for bigger systems.

To achieve those maximized yields in the shortest possible time, there has been a historic trend to bigger, faster and more efficient boats. However, despite increased capital investment, the landed value of wild salmon in B.C. declined from \$321 million in 1988 to just \$21 million in 1999.

Clearly, what has happened on the East Coast should be a wake-up call of profound importance to fisheries management here on the West Coast. In fairness, there have been serious attempts to save stocks by closing fisheries, by buying back licences, by imposing gear restrictions, by requiring the release of threatened stocks taken as by-catch and by imposing a new conservation ethic that precludes "dirty" fisheries on mixed stocks. Perhaps it's time to acknowledge that not all these

policies have been successful and that new, more aggressive conservation strategies may be required.

One place to start is a re-examination of policies for supporting commercial fishing interests. On both coasts the commercial fisheries have received huge government subsidies. That support encouraged too many to stay in an industry that couldn't support them for much longer than they would otherwise have stayed.

One hidden cost of these subsidies has been accelerated depletion of fish stocks. But the consequences have been hidden. As wealthy Western Europeans and North Americans import more and more fish from other parts of the world, consumers get a false sense of abundance, argues Reg Watson, another UBC scientist.

Urgent action by governments around both ocean basins is now required. The two scientists propose more reserves, further fishing fleet reductions and the abandonment of subsidies. In addition, perhaps it is time to rethink the whole structure of the fishery and its economic incentives so that it can be managed for ecosystem abundance rather than simple commercial yield.

Unfortunately, as Prof. Pauly observes, the only way politicians will take this issue seriously "is if there is an act of revulsion on the part of the public similar to that which brought an end to whaling." He's right.

The alternative, Prof. Watson points out, is that we'll soon leave marine deserts where we found biological richness. This would be a sin not just against nature, but against our own children. So the next time you visit the fish market, think about the resource, consider the power of public opinion and how it should be wielded. Educate yourself. Get involved. Make your voice heard.

From The Vancouver Sun, February 25, 2002, page A8