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Trendy seafoods called threat to stocks

By LES PERREAUX
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QUEBEC -- A growing worldwide taste for unusual sea creatures will pose the next major threat to fish stocks, one of the world's leading fisheries experts said yesterday.

The trend that made food out of calamari, sea cucumber and fish eggs soon will put Thai-style dried jellyfish onto North American plates, said Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia.

While the translucent, spineless jellyfish likely would be an acquired taste for most Westerners, Prof. Pauly's warning to an international conference of 1,700 fish experts was more than a comment on menu selections.

Prof. Pauly said the pattern of overfishing means species at the bottom of the marine food chain soon will be threatened, along with species at the top, such as cod and tuna.

He said he believes the process of "fishing lower and lower into the food web" will make recovery far more difficult for stocks of more traditional fish species as their food sources disappear.

"The bottom is falling out beneath our fish throughout the world," he told the conference of the American Fisheries Society, an international fishing management organization.

"In the 1960s, calamari was called bait. The sea cucumber was basically dirt. It was seen as part of the ground; it looks like a turd. It's not impossible to think we'll be eating jellyfish."

In the spring, the Canadian government closed the cod fishery off the northern coast of Newfoundland and the Gulf of St. Lawrence. Some fishermen have blamed seals for the dwindling cod stocks.

Prof. Pauly said seals may be eating more cod but probably because other species are being fished out. "We are attacking the food web at all levels and we are competing with everything for every species of fish out there.

"We are going into deeper water, further offshore to catch things that were previously unpalatable. We're making the entire system less resilient, more perilous."

Prof. Pauly supports creating vast fishery-free zones to protect all species. Barring such measures, he believes that rising costs and ebbing supplies of fuel eventually will afford some protection to fish.



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