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The cod's gone, yet the deadly dragger boats remain

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More than a decade has passed since the collapse of the northern cod stocks, arguably the greatest ecological catastrophe of the 20th century, and Ottawa seems to have learned very little. The admission last week by federal Fisheries Minister Robert Thibault that the cod fishery must be permanently closed only begins to illustrate federal incompetence in "managing" our common fish stocks.

At the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting last year in Boston, the world's top scientists were grim. "They're peeling the lid off the ocean and offering fish no place to hide," warned Professor Callum Roberts, of the University of York in the U.K.

"In 10 years, we'll probably be eating jellyfish sandwiches. Seafood is becoming something for the rich people to have," added the University of British Columbia's Dr. Reg Watson.

With 40,000 jobs lost in Newfoundland and \$4-billion spent in federal aid, one would hope that Canada's painful experience with the now-vanished cod stocks would make the Department of Fisheries and Oceans question its policies. Yet the DFO continues to indiscriminately license dragger boats.

Draggers tow large, weighted nets across the ocean floor, scooping up whatever is in their path. "Dragging" a net weighing several thousand kilograms across the ocean floor has predictable effects on sensitive bottom habitat. Everything from urchins to finfish are hauled up dead -- much of it discarded over the side (depending on what comes up in the net and what the boat is legally allowed to keep that day). The huge year-round catching capacity of many of these boats, coupled with the latest in sonar equipment, means few fish stocks are safe.

In Newfoundland, hook-and-line fishermen predicted the decimation of the cod stocks by dragger boats years before it happened. When the DFO refused to heed their warnings, these same fishermen took the federal government to court in 1989 in an ultimately unsuccessful court action to prevent draggers from finishing off the last of the cod. In its defence, the DFO stated confidently to the court that it "believed the spawning stock is not in danger of collapse." It cited evidence of "the stock rebuilding over this decade."

By 1992, the once-abundant cod had been "managed" into near extinction. A belated moratorium on all commercial cod fishing was brought in, too late. A fishery that for more than 400 years had sustained hundreds of small coastal communities was undone in a few short decades by destructive technology and

government incompetence. Last week, Mr. Thibault announced that the cod are gone and aren't coming back anytime soon.

Yet the federal government continues to do back-flips to avoid being held accountable. Another lawsuit was filed in 2001 in Nova Scotia by the Ecology Action Centre and Sierra Legal Defence Fund in an effort to force the DFO to exclude dragger boats from areas off southern Nova Scotia with sensitive bottom habitat such as rare deep-sea corals. The government's response has been to hide behind legal technicalities in order to avoid having evidence heard in court from some of the world's most respected marine scientists. This hardly inspires confidence that Ottawa is truly interested in the sustainable use of Canada's fisheries.

So why do Canadians have to go to the trouble of filing lawsuits against their own government to ensure that it does its job? Why does the DFO continue to favour destructive methods of fishing over more sustainable hook-and-line fish boats that employ far more people, waste less fish and don't damage the ocean floor? These questions cannot be ignored if we are to avoid repeating the painful lessons of the past. The reasonably healthy fisheries that still exist off Nova Scotia and elsewhere hang in the balance. The ocean won't hesitate to tell us again how finite her resources are.

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