

Saturday, April 19, 2003

[Back](#)

The Halifax Herald Limited

Fishery on edge, says prof

We either act now or kiss it good-bye, says outspoken author

By [Kelly Shiers](#) / Features Writer

AFTER PUBLISHING hundreds of scientific reports, controversial fisheries researcher Daniel Pauly is taking his message directly to the public: Fish stocks in the North Atlantic are plummeting, with no end in sight.

If things don't change, he says, we can forget about tasty cod fillets and look forward to eating plankton stew and jellyfish.

Or maybe we could turn the whole fishery into a museum.

It may sound exaggerated, and Pauly's extreme talk has landed him in hot water with critics. But a few pieces of hate mail aren't about to get this University of British Columbia professor to change his mind.

"What is happening right now is the industry is acting as if it is the owner of the resource," says the co-author of the reader-friendly book *In a Perfect Ocean: The State of Fisheries and Ecosystems in the North Atlantic Ocean*.

"Turning to the public is kind of the logical thing because they are actually the owners of the resource."

Pauly says it should come as no surprise that East Coast cod stocks haven't rebounded, despite quotas.

"Why should it?" he says, rhyming off reasons for its decline. Chief among them, he said, is the fact that cod is still fished.

Add to that changes in food supply (shrimp, for example), habitat changes caused by draggers, the volume of young cod caught as a by-product -



The Canadian Press

A fisherman unloads a catch of cod in Southern Harbour, Newfoundland. Fisheries commentator Daniel Pauly says that if we don't act soon, the Atlantic fishery will be wiped out.



Contributed
Daniel Pauly

collateral damage, so to speak, in other fisheries - and the fact that fewer adult cod are around to feast on the predators of young cod.

It all adds up to deep trouble, with no recovery in sight, says Pauly.

But what about the effect of changing water temperatures or predators like seals?

Last week, 200,000 kilograms of cod were found dead and dying on the east coast of Newfoundland, where scientists said cold water temperatures were causing them to freeze. Fishermen insisted hungry seals had herded the cod to the deep cold waters.

"Frozen cod in a bay, fed upon by seals. Sounds like a great big confirmation of what people have been saying all the time," Pauly said.

But he's far from convinced, suggesting one alternative scenario to consider.

"Now what if the cod were brought near the surface by something else, (for example) low oxygen? This would force them to expose themselves to waters not suitable for them, and to expose them to seal predations. In this case, the seals would be the agents of cod deaths, and benefit from them, without the cold or the seals being the cause for the event."

As well, he said, there's been no research on the effect of seal predation on cod stocks. Seals eat cod but also other things that may be cod predators. Without research, the seals' impact on cod will remain unknown, Pauly said, adding he knows that's a difficult idea for some people to grasp.

"When somebody sees a seal with a cod in its mouth, it seems to be a clear-cut, slam dunk, smoking-gun thing."

The book doesn't concentrate solely on cod, but looks at "fishing down the food web" - the loss of key predators, including tuna, and the resulting move to catch small fish, and invertebrates like clams, shrimp, oysters and sea cucumbers.

"At the end of all this, the big fish are gone and you have then something dominated by small organisms - little plankton species."

To stop the downward spiral, Pauly advocates:

- Huge catch reductions.
- Setting aside 20 per cent of the oceans as marine reserves by 2020.
- Labelling fish in the marketplace so consumers can choose products caught by sustainable methods.

- Exposing illegal and unsustainable fishing practices and the people behind them.

- Favouring small, local operations and having fishermen and their communities co-manage fisheries.

"We are squandering something given to us in millions of years of evolution," Pauly said, adding it'll take political will - forced, if necessary, by public demand - to make the changes needed to ensure the fisheries' survival.

Should Canada take action, it could lead the world in addressing the problems of fisheries everywhere, he said.

"It's not too late. (Cod) can rebuild if we give it a chance. But we are not, right now, doing so."

In a Perfect Ocean: The State of Fisheries and Ecosystems in the North Atlantic Ocean. By Daniel Pauly and Jay MacLean. Published by Island Press.

[Back](#)

Copyright © 2003 The Halifax Herald Limited