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## Oceans in Peril

It has long been clear that the world's oceans are in trouble, its coastal waters increasingly polluted and its fish stocks in various stages of decline. Now comes the most shocking news in years: a report from two Canadian scientists that says the world's mechanized fishing fleets have managed in a mere 50 years to wipe out nine-tenths of the world's biggest and most economically important species of fish, including cod, halibut, tuna and swordfish.

The report, published in the journal *Nature*, is the first to present a global picture of the drastic declines that earlier studies had detected on a regional basis. It provides further evidence that fishing fleets have been able to sustain harvests at high levels only by venturing further and further out to sea in a desperate but ultimately self-defeating effort to stay in business.

The analysis also provides a timely prelude to a flurry of studies and conferences aimed at shedding more light on the problem and suggesting solutions: a meeting of experts, organized by Conservation International, to be held this week in Los Cabos, Mexico; the Pew Oceans Commission's coming final report on America's territorial waters; and, later this year, a long-awaited report from the Congressionally chartered Commission on Ocean Policy.

The crisis described in the *Nature* article obviously requires global solutions. When it comes to the strip mining of the oceans, it is hard to top Japan's heavily subsidized fleets. Some European nations are only slightly less predatory. But America is hardly blameless — one-third of its fish stocks are in trouble — and Americans can set an example for others. Experts identify three main strategies.

One is to shrink the industry. It will take political courage and money to fashion a soft landing for displaced fishermen. But there are clearly too many boats chasing too few fish. Another important step is to expand America's tiny network of marine sanctuaries. Protected zones that give fish a chance to reproduce have yielded encouraging results. Daniel Pauly, a noted Canadian scientist, argues that fully 20 percent of the world's oceans should be set aside for this purpose.

Third, America must reorganize the way it manages its oceans. At present, responsibility for rebuilding fish populations is divided between eight regional councils, which are largely interested in maintaining the harvest, and the Commerce Department, which does not give the matter the attention it needs and which, in any case, has tended to defer to the regional councils. Indeed, oceans policy is pretty much where federal forest policy was 30 years ago, when the rules were set by a logging industry eager to maintain the annual harvest in concert with a compliant bureaucracy.

Forest policy changed when the country realized that the national forests were not an inexhaustible resource and indeed belonged to all Americans, not just the loggers. A similar shift in attitude — in the White House, in Congress and in the public mind — will now be required to rescue the seas.