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'In a few decades, there will be no fish'

Overfishing will have serious consequences for many people, prize-winning scientist says

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VANCOUVER -- From his separation from his mother as a toddler in postwar France, to his deprived childhood as a live-in servant in Switzerland, to his recent winning of a prestigious Japanese award, Daniel Pauly's life is like a Dickensian tale writ large.

For years, the B.C. marine biologist has worked on the devastation of the world's oceans and their inhabitants, helping to bring the issue into the spotlight.

His efforts were honoured this month in Osaka, Japan, where he was awarded that country's Cosmos Prize, sometimes called the Nobel Prize for environmentalism. The honour carried a monetary award of 40 million yen (about $415,000).

In an interview at his office at the University of British Columbia, where he is director of the Fisheries Centre, the 59-year-old scientist attributes the high public profile of his work to "sheer luck."

"I have succeeded in making it visible because I am lucky in having papers published in Science and Nature," he said.

He plans to donate part of the prize to UBC for a scholarship endowment, for students from developing countries.

Five of his papers in prestigious scientific journals have made the biggest impact. They present empirical evidence that fishery harvests are declining around the globe, and that the fishing industry is not only wiping out certain species, but is also taking so much biomass that a third of the world's oceans have become the undersea equivalent of a clear-cut forest.

To emphasize why people should care about the state of the oceans, and the loss of fish species, Dr. Paul likens fish to giraffes.

"On one level, I don't need giraffes. On the other hand, we do enjoy giraffes," he said. "That's what we've lost -- we've lost the buffalo, the lions, the giraffes of the ocean."

Dr. Pauly, who has written about 30 books and presented 500 scientific papers, was also honoured with the Cosmos Prize for his work establishing and promoting Fishbase, a global database of fish species; a website (http://www.theseaaroundus.org); and a system to analyze accurate fish harvests.

While the environment has become his focus, Dr. Pauly first became a fisheries biologist because, like many during the social ferment of the 1960s and 1970s, he wanted to help eradicate Third

World poverty and hoped fisheries could help.

Poverty was something he knew about first-hand. He was born into the desperation of postwar France in 1946 to a white French mother and a black American father who abandoned the family. When David was 2 he fell ill; a Swiss family who had befriended his impoverished mother took him to Switzerland, ostensibly to care for him until he was healthy.

"I was not kidnapped in the sense of being taken with force . . . but her situation was exploited," he recalled. He spent his youth as an uneducated servant in the Swiss family's house, "doing the washing, everything," before running away to Germany at age 17.

There he worked at a missionary institution caring for mentally disabled people, before getting a day job and continuing his education at night. During that time, he regularly visited his mother in France and also met his father in the United States.

In his 20s, he entered Germany's University of Kiel, where he earned his master's degree in science in 1974, at age 28, and his doctorate in fisheries biology five years later.

"At the time everybody with a consciousness and some sort of an IQ wanted to do something, they were into changing the world," Dr. Pauly said. "My interests are more literary, in philosophy and history, but I felt that I needed a practical skill. I learned fisheries because, like agronomy, it was applied."

As a biologist, he worked in North Africa, Indonesia and the Philippines. Eventually, he came to believe that his work with bureaucrats managing fisheries was futile, and he left a research post in the Philippines for a job as a professor at UBC in 1994. He and his wife Sandra, a Vancouver educator, have two adult children in Canada.

Even now, he has nothing but criticism for fisheries bureaucrats, including those in Canada, who allow overfishing for short-term political gain. He is equally impatient with the many scientists dedicated to collecting more and more data.

"I realized one has to work through the public and the conservation community," he said, adding that he has received international notice partly because he is not "one of the gloomies."

While other scientists deliver dire messages about the state of the world, he says, "I always laugh, because it's so absurd that it is funny."

"People think [others are] gloomy, and they know I am saying the same thing, but they don't put me among the gloomies."

But there's no mistaking the sharp messages Dr. Pauly delivers with the gentle laugh. The time for action to stop overfishing is long past, he says. The world's large fish are nearly eradicated and the oceans are suffering as result.

Dr. Pauly argues that Canadians might miss having fish on their dinner table, but people need to realize what the end result of overfishing will be.

"In the developing world, entire countries depend on fishing. If fishing is doing what we say, then

essentially, there is no tomorrow for them. We can expect that in a few decades there will be no fish left."

Dr. Pauly advocates setting up protected marine sanctuaries that cover 20 to 30 per cent of the ocean, and dramatically curbing fishing.

"It's not enough to just do the right thing. We need for the right thing to be enforced [by governments]. It's not enough that we don't do harms, but that we don't let others do them."
