The Japan Times

Overfishing threatening too many species: expert

By ERIKO ARITA
Staff writer

Fish species are being endangered because an increasing number of fishing boats and advanced technologies are contributing to a rise in overfishing, according to a French fisheries expert recognized Tuesday for his efforts to protect marine life.

Since the 1960s, increasing industrialization has lead to the expansion of fishing around the globe, said Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Center at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

This has increased the exploitation of marine resources around the world, Pauly said.

Eight hundred species of fish are on the Red List of Threatened Species issued in 2004 by the International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources.

But Pauly, who headed a project to create the world's largest fish database, which contains information on some 30,000 species, said there are many more endangered species not listed because large numbers of fish picked up as bycatch -- fish caught in nets by accident and killed -- are not reported.

Daniel Pauly

"We are losing species without documentation," he told The Japan Times. "You cannot prove it because we don't have the information."

Pauly received the International Cosmos Prize on Tuesday in Osaka for his research on global marine ecosystems. The Cosmos prize is awarded annually by the Commemorative Foundation for the International Garden and Greenery Exposition, Osaka, Japan, 1990, to honor excellence in research that promotes "the harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind."

Pauly and other researchers discovered that while official statistics showed that global fish catches have been growing in past decades, they actually have been decreasing.

In a report issued in 2001 as part of the ongoing project "The Sea Around Us," which is studying the global impact of fisheries on marine ecosystems, Pauly and his team showed that China's official data were incorrect and had significantly affected the global figures. China, a major fishing country, had overreported its catches throughout the 1990s.

Catches have been declining since the late 1980s because of decreasing numbers of fish, Pauly

said. The low stocks are being caused by overfishing brought about by advanced fishing technologies, excessive state subsidies, and an increase in the number of large fishing vessels.

One example of how technology has changed fishing is echo sounders.

Historically, fishermen have had to rely on experience to find good stocks of fish to get a good catch, Pauly said.

But with the introduction of echo sounders, "it became possible even for a captain with no experience to find fish," he said.

Another tool, global positioning systems, have allowed fishermen to get an understanding of what the seabed looks like. A GPS can help locate places where schools of fish might be hiding, such as rocky areas.

To save endangered marine species and secure food resources for the future, countries should establish "marine protected areas" where fishing is banned, the professor said.

"If we reduce the (fishing) efforts, after a few years the population will be rebuilt and we catch more," Pauly said.

To help depleted fish stocks recover, 10 percent to 30 percent of the world's oceans should be protected, he said. Currently, less than one percent of the ocean is protected.

In the Philippines, mayors have the power to designate sea areas under their jurisdiction as protected, Pauly said, adding that the establishment of marine reserves there has led to the regeneration of fish stocks.

The idea of creating marine reserves is similar to conserving forests by establishing national parks, which have been recognized by the public and authorities as a necessity, he said.

"Fisheries have a very strong impact on ocean life. Much more than any other sources -- for example, pollution or climate change," Pauly said. "We must have areas where fish are left to grow."

The Japan Times: Oct. 22, 2005

Go back to The Japan Times Online   Close window