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Metro

Marine care is our top priority: WWF

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A green group is campaigning for a cleanup of our waters

Conservationists have proposed an "SOS" campaign to restore Hong Kong's waterways from their current critical condition to a "Phuket-like experience."

"Marine conservation is the most important conservation in Hong Kong," Markus Shaw, chairman of World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) in Hong Kong told reporters Thursday, adding that Hong Kong's fisheries are in a critical state.

A 1998 consultant's report to the Agricultural, Fisheries and Conservation Department states Hong Kong fish stocks are in "critical" condition and that "urgent action is required to rescue fish stocks from their over-exploited state."

According to the AFCD report, catches in most areas had dropped more than 50 percent and fish fry production had decreased by 90 percent from the previous decade.

This critical state of the local marine habitat prompted WWF to propose the Save Our Seas (SOS) plan to stop all bottom trawling and enlarge the size of the no-take zone—where all fishing is banned—to cover Tolo Harbour and Port Shelter in the northeastern New Territories and all marine parks.

"Over 40 percent of our land areas are protected by country parks. In contrast, our seas are a free-for-all of which only 2 percent is covered by marine park. [Marine

protection policy] is poorly enforced and full of loopholes," Shaw said.

Marine conservation experts such as Bill Ballantine from the University of Auckland and Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia have estimated that 30 percent of the world's oceans would need to be declared no-take zones to allow major fisheries any chance of recovering from overfishing, Shaw said.

However, the no-take zones proposed in the Fisheries Protection Ordinance Bill amount to only 2 percent of Hong Kong's territorial waters and `` have ill-defined borders that will be difficult to enforce," he said.

`` This is less than one-10th of what is required. The impact would be negligible so what's the point?"

The group proposed no-take zones should cover 8 percent, or about 13,700 hectares, of Hong Kong waters.

`` There will be an explosive recovery in fish," he said, adding that significant changes would occur within five years in Hong Kong's sub-tropical waters. `` Clear water full of coral and full of fish for the northeastern waters which based on recreation and tourism - a Phuket like experience- will be on our doorstep," he added.

However, fishermen have challenged the suggestion.

`` The enlargement of no-take-zone will only make our lives harder," said Pang Wah-kam, chairman of the Hong Kong Fishermen Association. Agricultural and fisheries sector legislator Wong Yung-kan also asked the government to ease the financial hardship of fishermen when implementing different measures.

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