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Scientists say reports point to a big reduction in large ocean fish

by COLIN O'CONNOR

RESEARCHERS who have studied decades of catch records from Japanese fishi and data collected by American and Australian agencies in the 1990s, have con populations of large ocean fish have fallen by as much as 90 per cent.

Jack Ward, Director of Conservation Services, said the reduction in numbers w realistic, and conformed to Bermuda's experience when considered in light of e of the "pristine" environment found by Bermuda's settlers.

The scientists, who reported their findings in the current issue of *Science*, say is the first broad look at diversity across open oceans, and the reduction of spe ocean ecosystems less resilient against environmental changes like global wari "I think that there a number of realities there that should concern us," said Mr leading researcher, Daniel Pauly, said that unless we are comfortable with the our successors will be eating plankton, we should all be concerned.

"Some people may find the 90 per cent number difficult to swallow, but it's rea the light of the concept of shifting baselines, which holds that what we have cc of as the 'normal' state of an environment was already substantially degraded.

"There was probably a loss of 50 per cent a very long time ago, and the early i make it clear that before man was out there heavily exploiting the oceans, the huge abundance. It was reported that Sir George Somers could catch enough i the whole complement of the *Sea Venture* in half an hour."

The Japanese data record the catches in 50 years of fishing for 15 species of ti billfish like marlin and swordfish. But the researchers cross-referenced this infc with data collected about more than 140 species by American and Australian g agencies, and the results suggest their conclusions apply more widely.

Boris Worm, a biologist at Dalhousie University in Canada and a lead author of said: "The oceans have been drained of species, basically", and suggested that be done to protect areas where diversity persists.

One of the five sizeable diversity "hot-spots" recognised by the scientists is clo Bermuda: an area of the east coast of Florida, and the others are south of the Islands, off the Great Barrier Reef in Australia, in the central South Pacific nort Island, and in the Indian Ocean near Sri Lanka.

The researchers said fishing records show how areas with high diversity in the been shrinking in the years since. The area between Australia and Indonesia u one of those "hot spots", but Dr. Worm told the *New York Times* that the area diversity "just got smaller and smaller until it was indistinguishable from the re ocean".

He said global warming was worrisome because warmer waters were very bad swimmers like tuna and billfish, which generate enormous quantities of interna they swim.

"The world's tuna fishery today is largely a matter of yellowfin and skipjack tur bluefin, albacore and other species rarely appear on fishermen's lines."



The topic is important to Bermuda, because just last month the island's Big Ga Classic was estimated to have generated \$3 million of revenue in four days, and tournament was the highlight of the newly-introduced Bermuda Triple Crown E Championship.

Tourism Minister Dr. Ewart Brown said: "Attendees of the event continue to be with the abundance of blue marlin in Bermuda's waters."

A Bermudian fishing expert said Bermuda would be well served by the creator sanctuary within the 200-mile limit which would preclude any industrial fishing "We have size limits in place, in terms of what fish can be landed, and tag and rules, and fines for those who don't comply. I don't know if Government will re fishing further, because it's still important for tourism."

Mr. Ward said Bermuda should be careful about the possibility of over-exploiting species.

"I think that the big prize has been won in Bermuda the last three years, and it is to be an *extremely* popular destination for those game fishermen.

"To date, it certainly benefits tourism to a great extent, and puts us on the map as a activity, but if you win globally three years in a row, more boats will certainly show up next year.

"There are size limits, but the fishermen are allowed to take the larger ones, and it is a concern that some of them are reproductively-active female fish. I believe that the loss of 1,000-pound fish are not inconsequential to that population, and perhaps the fishing fraternity could be leaned on to develop some form of technology which allows them to document the size of the fish without pulling it out of the water.

"I am not an expert on these aspects, and I know that the billfish population in Bermuda has considerable economic value, so we need to find a way to allow that recreational and tourism value to be maintained without destroying the fish."

In many areas, the researchers say, species diversity has fallen by half since the 1970s, meaning that boats now catch only half the number of tuna and billfish species then.

Another author of the new study, Dr. Ransom Myers, also of Dalhousie, said: "It does not mean that all of those species are extinct, but the fact they are not being caught is dramatic."

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