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Fishing Subsidies Spur Emptying Of The Oceans

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Little-noticed but enormously significant steps were taken recently in World Trade Organization negotiations to rid the world's fishing industry of government subsidies that provide incentives to fish the oceans to death.

For the first time since the launch of the WTO's current round of talks in 2001, member nations have moved beyond the consensus that many fishing subsidies lead to overfishing and destructive practices.

At least five countries have submitted detailed proposals on eliminating these subsidies, and serious negotiations are underway. It is a step beyond rhetoric toward resolution on what is the greatest single action that can be taken to ensure the future viability of ocean ecosystems and the bounty they produce.

What's at stake? The tragic truth is the world's fisheries are nearing irreversible collapse. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that more than 75 percent of the world's fish stocks are in jeopardy. These stocks include many of high commercial value: haddock and cod in the North Atlantic, Argentine hake in the South Atlantic and most species of tuna.

For a hungry planet, switching to chicken nuggets is not an option. Fish provide the primary protein source for a billion people. In addition to the disruption of global nutrition needs, the depletion or outright extinction of fish populations will fundamentally change the ecosystems that cover more than two-thirds of the Earth.

There is ample evidence to show this is occurring. Fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly's book "In a Perfect Ocean" describes the sea bed beneath the once-bountiful continental shelf off the coast of Maine. "The bottom is smooth. In many places, except for the tracks left by a few thin worms, the animals have largely left without a trace. There are no fish."

His findings are supported by a recent Oceana analysis of more than 100 fisheries in the Northeast Atlantic that concluded that more than half should be closed immediately because of depletion and that only 10 percent had enough fish to sustain current fishing levels.

With the undersea moonscape that Mr. Pauly describes being replicated all over the world, it is reasonable to ask why the global commercial fishing industry seems hell-bent on destroying the raw material that sustains it. The answer is government subsidies.

By conservative estimates, global subsidy levels amount to at least \$15 billion annually. This is equivalent to 20 percent of the value of the world's commercial fish catch. An industry awash in subsidies will result in overcapacity and excessive capture of fish.

Put simply, the world needs to stop making payments that encourage commercial fishermen to catch too many fish. Refreshingly, that proposition has united interests that typically stand with

daggers drawn.

Free traders are no fans of subsidies that warp marketplaces. Conservationists are greatly concerned about the oceans' health and the extinction of species. Developing countries are particularly harmed; many are unable to establish their fishing industries because of competition from subsidized distant fleets.

For U.S. Trade Representative Rob Portman, a strong supporter of the fisheries negotiation, this new phase in the talks provides an opportunity to demonstrate that the multilateral trading system can work to solve intractable global problems. Indeed, this is the first time that environmental considerations have led to the negotiation of improved trade measures.

The admittedly obscure "WTO fisheries subsidies negotiations" this month have profound implications, from our kitchen table to the future of the planet. Countless species of fish, the millions of people who work in the fishing industry and the billions who are nourished by it are together on a vessel that is about to capsize because of the listing ballast of government subsidies.

The broad coalition of conservation, consumer and business interests, along with nations large and small, that support this initiative can be assured that their efforts have borne fruit. But the hardest work is still in front of us, and we must be more determined than ever to see these negotiations to a successful conclusion.

Andrew Sharpless is chief executive officer of Oceana, an international organization dedicated to protecting the world's oceans.

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