

Fisheries need political action, researcher says

BY MARK HUME, VANCOUVER

Less research, more political action.

That's the simple formula for saving the world's fish that is being advanced by Daniel Pauly, a leading researcher who has been tracking the steady and alarming decline of global fish stocks.

"We don't need more science," Dr. Pauly said in a statement released yesterday as he prepared to make a presentation to the American Association for the Advancement of Science at a conference in St. Louis, Mo.

"Of course, we need to learn more about fish. But research is often publicly funded on the grounds that this is an alternative to other political action. We know enough [now] to prevent the continued decimation of global fisheries."

Dr. Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia, said there is a global crisis in fisheries management that governments need to address immediately.

He said that the world has passed a peak in the total weight of fish caught in the world's oceans.

Through analyzing global fishery statistics, he found that the peak happened in parts of the world between the mid-1970s and the mid-1990s. The timing was tied to the spread of industrial fishing.

Once what he calls "peak fish" was reached, the total haul of fish globally began to shrink, despite increased fishing effort and increasingly effective technologies.

"There's no doubt about this," Dr. Pauly said. "We're in a phase where increasing fishing effort produces less catch."

He said that in one fishery after another, stocks have continued to decline, without conservation efforts, despite abundant signals that the stocks were being overfished. In some, such as with the Atlantic cod fishery off the coast of Newfoundland, a complete collapse of stocks resulted.



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Daniel Pauly, director of UBC's Fisheries Centre, says world governments are using studies as an alternative to taking action.

Dr. Pauly said governments must step in because the fishing industry — with a primary interest in short-term economic gain, not long-term sustainability of fish stocks — has not shown any ability to restrain itself.

"The industry is ready to commit suicide at any time. It's an industry that needs to be reined in for its own good."

Dr. Pauly said that illegal catches are common, and he accused most governments of catering to the interests of industry over the needs of citizens.

He said governments need to reduce excess fishing capacity and enforce sustainable fishing levels.

"Public policy must be downsizing the industry to a level that allows for sustained catch and stocks to rebound," he said.

Dr. Pauly also called for the creation of "no-take zones" covering about 20 per cent of habitats.

With adequate measures taken, he said, fish stocks could be rebuilt to a point where catches could increase.

"The irony is that reducing fishing actually increases the catch in the long term," said Dr. Pauly, who has written hundreds of scientific papers.