

## Overfishing in Jamaica

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The headline of a story in Monday's **Gleaner** threw me off: 'Plans afoot to expand fisheries industry'. "What!" I said to myself; "don't they know **Jamaica** already has the most overfished waters in the Caribbean -- and probably the world?" But when I read the article I realised that the headline was misleading. The plans are not to expand 'fisheries' (i.e. the **hunting** of wild fish) but 'aquaculture' (fish farming).

A few weeks ago it was reported in the highly reputable scientific journal **Nature** that all species of wild **seafood** currently fished in the world's oceans are projected to collapse by the year 2050; an international team of ecologists and **economists** conducted research for four years and came up with this prediction. In the study, collapse is defined as 90 per cent depletion.

It is not that fish stock collapses will begin in 2050; the scientists point to several vast fisheries that have already collapsed in recent decades due to overfishing, the star example being the northern Atlantic cod that used to give us our 'saltfish.'

### Catch declined

Our own stocks of grouper have already collapsed, and our snappers will not be far behind. In fact, our fish catch has steadily and consistently declined over the last few decades. According to government statistics, at independence in 1962 our national catch was 24.2 million lb of fish while in 1981 the catch had fallen to 15.9 million lb (a total decline of 34.3 per cent, or 1.81 per cent per year).

The **Gleaner** article last Monday reported that "Last year alone, the catch declined by more than 11 per cent, according to figures from the Ministry of Agriculture and Lands," and this decline is from an already low figure. Our fishing industry is in crisis!

Every year our imports of fish increase, costing us increasing amounts of foreign exchange. We are overfishing ourselves into national debt and increased human poverty. Fishers I know complain that often when they return to base, their meagre catch of fish cannot even recover the money they spent on boat gas.

In response to the article in **Nature**, scientists who study African fisheries have rushed to claim that their fish stocks will collapse first. A study published in **New Scientist** in 2002 warned about West African waters, where according to fisheries researcher Daniel Pauly, fish stocks already had "crashed by 80 per cent."

I don't believe that Africa can claim that honour: Jamaican fish stocks will be the first in the world to totally collapse. We are much further along the overfishing road than Africa. Years ago Caribbean Community (CARICOM) rated us as the most overfished waters in the Caribbean - a far way away from the number two overfished country (St. Lucia)! There is no global ranking for overfishing that I know of; should one be calculated we stand a good chance of winning that honour!

What is causing this serious overfishing? Simply put, the problem is that there are too many fishers chasing fewer and fewer fish. Monday's **Gleaner** article put it well: "An alarming number of people are entering the industry at a time when the resources are declining at a rapid pace." At a time when the industry should be decapitalising (more and more boats should be retired from the fishery), the number of fishing boats is increasing. Much of this is directly due to a well-meaning but totally misguided NGO called 'Food For the Poor' which is giving out hundreds of fishing canoes and engines around Jamaica suitable only for the overfished inshore fishery.

They believe they are helping, and despite the fact that others and myself have told them on more than one occasion that they are only making things worse, they continue this practice. "Lord, save us from ignorant do-gooders!" In this case, 'Food for the Poor' is taking food out of the mouths of the poor.

### **Traps killing Juvenile fish**

Another cause of our increase in overfishing is the increasing use of damaging fishing gear. Small mesh apertures in fish pots cause large quantities of juvenile fish to be caught (i.e. before they get mature to breed) which reduces in quantity the next generation of fish. Although I and others have frequently written and spoken about this over the last 15 years, even now there is no law prescribing a minimum mesh size for fish traps.

I appreciate the efforts by the Ministry of Agriculture to attract capture fishers into aquaculture, but if they are serious, there is a lot of housekeeping they must do with legislation and enforcement in the capture fisheries first!

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