

# INTERNATIONAL Herald Tribune

## Protecting our deep seas

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In weighty discussions that have been quietly taking place at the United Nations, one topic has received little public attention: a proposal to halt unregulated bottom trawling on the high seas. The world's oceans that lie beyond 200 miles from shore are not under the jurisdiction of any single country but are considered to be the patrimony of all humanity. The proposal has huge global significance.

If such a moratorium were enacted it would constitute the single most sweeping act of habitat protection in human history, covering an estimated 67 million square miles of ocean, an area larger than all of the world's continents combined.

Considered by many marine scientists to be the most destructive fishing gear in the world's oceans, deep sea bottom trawls consist of nets the size of football fields that can reach down more than a mile beneath the water's surface. Weighted down by massive steel doors and often attached to heavy rollers, these nets can weigh five tons or more. When dragged across the ocean floor, they frequently crush everything in their path.

Not only do these trawls break up the delicate structure of sea mounts and deep-water corals that provide critical habitat to countless species of fish and other marine life, they also contribute to the serial depletion of deep-sea fisheries. Moreover, because these corals, fish and other life forms are very slow growing, they can take centuries or more to recover, if they do at all.

Many of the areas destroyed by unregulated bottom trawls are of inestimable biological and ecological value. Scientists calculate that the deep sea contains millions of species, along with entire ecosystems that are found nowhere else on earth. Many of these have yet to be identified by science, much less assessed for their potential value to people in the form of medicines and other products that can help enhance human life.

In 2001, the last year for which good data are available, there were only an estimated 200-to-300 vessels involved in high seas bottom trawling, a tiny fraction of the estimated three million fishing vessels in operation worldwide. The world's bottom-trawl fleet netted less than one half of one percent of the estimated value of the global catch of marine fish.

By almost any standard, the economic value of this type of fishing is negligible, even more so when you consider that it is being propped up by subsidies. Indeed, a recent study by Rashid Sumaila, an economist at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, estimates that if you remove the subsidies that are given each year to the high seas bottom-trawl fleet, these vessels would be operating at a loss and would be unable to continue fishing.

When the social and economic benefits of unregulated high seas bottom trawling are contrasted to the vast damage it does to some of the most vulnerable and fragile marine habitats on earth, it is simply foolish for the global community to let it continue.

Over the next several weeks, a decision will be forged in the UN General Assembly regarding what to do about the use of this type of fishing. Numerous countries including Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, the United States and many northern European nations are advocating a halt to this practice. However, a handful of other countries like Japan, Canada, Iceland and Spain are working to block UN action.

Allowing this kind of unregulated destructive fishing to continue is not in the long-term interest of humanity. Ultimately, we have far more to gain from protecting the places being destroyed by these trawls than we do from allowing them to be irresponsibly fished.

This is a problem we can solve, and solve quickly. There are relatively few boats and people involved, and not much vested economic interest that would be compromised by halting the fishing. There is an opportunity to do this now, before a lot more damage is done. Hopefully the world's nations, those who fish and those who don't, will not let it slip by.

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