



NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR

THE INDEPENDENT

VOL. 4 ISSUE 10 — ST. JOHN'S, NEWFOUNDLAND AND LABRADOR — SUNDAY THROUGH SATURDAY, MARCH 5-11, 2006 — WWW.THEINDEPENDENT.CA — \$1.00 HOME DELIVERY (HST included) \$1.50 RETAIL (HST included)

14 • INDEPENDENTWORLD

MARCH 5, 2006

Could a little Bono save the world's fish?

Overfishing a global problem few understand, issue could use higher profile

ST. LOUIS, Mo.
By Peter Calamai
Tostar wire service

Around the world, the fishing industry cares only about short-term profit, the supposed government watchdogs are little more than lapdogs and the public finds the problems of ocean fishing boring.

That's why the imperilled fishes of the seas need a Bono or a Nelson Mandela to save them, says fisheries expert Daniel Pauly, a professor at the University of British Columbia.

"People see fishing itself as something romantic. They don't realize this is an industrial might that has been unleashed on the ocean," Pauly says. "Jacques Cousteau succeeded in making the ocean interesting but he did not succeed in showing how threatened it is."

Vast stretches of the ocean floor are the marine equivalent of terrestrial brownfields, a patch in the Mediterranean that has reverted to primordial ooze, and everywhere giant trawlers must chase smaller and weirder fish because the big and familiar are largely gone.

But the oceans have a much bigger role than merely supplying scallops or orange roughly (once called "slime-heads") for our plates, Pauly says. They are as much our common heritage as the forests, and they're effectively being clear-cut, bulldozed and burned down all at once.

"We need someone like a Bono or a Mandela who can speak directly to people and help them understand how this concerns them," he says. "It's very difficult for most people to imagine that the sea is that fragile.

"This isn't a potential problem. The crisis has hit, the species are going down. The cod doesn't have a future; it has a great past."

If the public hasn't got the message, it's not for lack of trying on the part of the 59-year-old fish biologist. For the past decade, the French-born researcher has been issuing warnings about the depopulation of the oceans from his post at the UBC Fisheries Centre.

Pauly's impassioned crusade has brought honours and recognition: profiles in the top two research journals and membership in the Royal Society of Canada. In October, he won the \$425,000 international Cosmos Prize awarded by the Expo'90 Foundation in Japan for research excellence that promotes the concept of "harmonious coexistence of nature and mankind."

There have also been more than 500 scientific articles bearing Pauly's name, the creation of a global database with profiles of 28,000 fish species, and a hard-hitting book, *In a Perfect Ocean*, published three years ago.

Above all else, there has been this startling statistic that Pauly first revealed in 2001: the yearly catch landed legally by the world's marine fisheries actually peaked at 80 million to 85 million tonnes in the late 1980s; since then, it's been dropping about 500,000 tonnes a year, indicating that fish stocks have been depleted so low that fleets can no longer catch their quotas.

"The decline was hidden for years because China was over-reporting its catch," Pauly says.

It took more than 10 years for this deliberate deception to come to light because the global fishing statistics, compiled by the UN's Food and Agriculture agency, are presented in an



UZ's Bono, known for taking on a cause or two.

Paul Daly/The Independent

arcane fashion that few can penetrate.

Pauly also blames the government agencies that are supposed to regulate fishing as a sustainable resource nationally and internationally.

"It's not possible for ordinary people to fathom the degree of co-optation of the regulatory agencies by the fishing industry," he says.

As a prime example, Pauly pointed to the near-extinction of the Atlantic cod because Canada's regulators ignored the weight of scientific advice to placate an industry that demanded high quotas because of its big capital investment in giant trawlers.

No one in the industry or the government was ever called to account for the decisions that threw tens of thousands out of work, Pauly says bitterly.

Once a champion for the fishes is found, there's lots of factual ammunition for what promises to be a long and rough crusade.

The Sea Around Us project, which

Pauly directs at the fisheries centre in Vancouver, has transformed those inaccessible statistics into easily understood maps and graphics revealing local, regional and worldwide trends in marine fisheries since 1950.

Rainer Froese says making information about fisheries simple and accessible to the wider public is the only way to stop the current reckless exploitation.

When politicians meet to set fishing quotas, they usually ignore the advice from their own government scientists, says Froese, a senior scientist at the Institute of Marine Research in Kiel, Germany.

"The biology of the fish becomes negotiable," he says.

Pauly dismisses experts who say more research is needed to know exactly how much to tweak the quotas for each species. "It's relatively simple to stabilize a fishery," he says.

He says the nets of giant trawlers

aren't selective and scoop up many different species of fish. If low quotas are set on just a few species in any fishing zone, then the industry has to reduce its overall catch to avoid penalties for hauling in too many of the designated species.

In addition to the hard-nosed enforcement of sustainable fishing levels, Pauly advocates creation of no-take zones covering about one fifth of the richest fish habitats and buying giant trawlers with public funds to eliminate excess fishing capacity.

"In principle, fish farming is a good thing," pointing to aquaculture leader China, which focuses on freshwater fish that are fed vegetable material.

Canada and Europe, by contrast, concentrate on fish like salmon, which are raised on fish meal.

"It's the culture of cannibals. The more salmon you grow, the more fish that have to be caught and ground up to feed the salmon."