canada.com
WHERE PERSPECTIVES CONNECT

Tuesday » November 7 » 2006

Fisheries 'facing collapse'

Only radical action will prevent world's seas from dying by 2050, report says

Nicholas Read and Margaret Munro
Vancouver Sun; CanWest News Service

Friday, November 03, 2006

To listen to story, click the **VoicePrint link**

The world's fisheries will collapse by 2050 unless there is a revolution in the way the oceans are managed, says an international research team whose members include a University of B.C. scientist.

The researchers, whose assessment of the dying seas was published in the journal Science on Thursday, say it's not too late to save the fisheries that feed millions of people. But major changes are required, and soon.

"We're in for some profound changes," says Reg Watson, a senior research associate at the UBC Fisheries Centre, and one of the authors of the Science report.

"Can we make them happen slowly enough so that we can make the necessary changes in management? I'm hopeful. But people's awareness needs to be raised. What was unthinkable before is happening now."

He blames the problem on overfishing, habitat destruction and pollution, though environmental change is an increasingly serious factor as well.

"We have essentially been mining down marine systems by taking the biggest and best fish first, which is the equivalent of gold in a mine," Watson said. "Then we've moved down to smaller fish and then even smaller fish so that now we're fishing for fish in deep, cold water -- fish that take a long time to reproduce."

Twenty-nine per cent of the world's fish and seafood species, including Canada's once immense Atlantic cod fishery, have collapsed to less than 10 per cent of their original size, the researchers say. That includes 31 species in the area that extends from the tip of the Alaskan Peninsula to the southern

Canada/U.S. border.

Included on that list are such signature B.C. species as coho and chinook salmon, oolichan and rainbow trout.

"The good news is that the stocks in B.C. and Alaska are probably not as imperilled as many other places in the world," Watson said. "But, at the same time, we know from living in B.C. that there are many species we have to leave alone."

The main problem, says the report, is that bigger boats outfitted with more efficient technologies are chasing fewer fish, causing the overall global catch to fall by 13 per cent between 1994 and 2003.

In Prince Rupert, people who make their living processing salmon and other types of fish know how serious the situation is. This year, because of a collapse of the Alaska pink salmon run, all but a handful of about 1,500 shore workers in the northern B.C. town failed to accumulate enough hours this summer to qualify for Employment Insurance. That means many of them could end up on welfare.

"There's been less and less work over the years, but this year has been a disaster," said Christina Nelson of the Prince Rupert branch of the United Fishermen and Allied Workers Union. "The Alaska pink salmon just didn't show. It's probably the worst year for 50 years."

Making matters even more desperate, the area's herring fishery had its smallest catch since it began in 1974, and the crab fishery was at its lowest in 15 years.

The situation is changing farther south as well. According to the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, only 2,220 licences were issued this year for the entire B.C. salmon fishery. That's down 50 per cent from 10 years ago.

And that is despite the fact that Pacific salmon are among the best-managed species in the world, says Watson.

The oolichan fishery, by contrast, is all but gone.

Jimmy Adams, a member of the Katzie First Nation near Pitt Meadows, can remember when he could make a living fishing salmon and oolichan. Not any more.

"You used to be able to fish five days a week for months. Now you can only go out three or four times a year."

Adams, who is 64, has been trying to sell his boat, a 30-foot gillnetter, for the

past four years, but no one wants to buy it, he says, because everyone wants out of the business.

The Science report warns that all fish and seafood species face a similar fate unless there are serious changes in the way fish are caught and managed.

"We are predicting we are going to run out of everything in future if we don't change our behaviour," said Boris Worm, a fisheries biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

Federal Fisheries officials acknowledge the oceans have been mismanaged in the past, but say changes have been made both internationally and in Canada to try to prevent further decline.

"In the event that we don't make these changes, that predication might in fact be something that has some credibility, but we are making changes to prevent that from happening," David Bevan, DFO assistant deputy minister, says of the study's "grim" forecast for 2050.

"The only caveat I have, I guess, is that it has been tough slogging and we are dealing with ecosystems under significant change due to temperatures."

A warming trend is evident in the waters on all three Canadian coasts.

"We see 41/2-degree temperature increases in some of our stations off Newfoundland," Bevan said.

But Worm says DFO is still making what he considers misguided decisions, such as opening a small cod fishery in Newfoundland this summer, even though the stocks show little sign of recovery.

He's also baffled by federal Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn's recent refusal to support a proposed UN moratorium on bottom trawling in international waters, a practice likened to clearcutting on the sea bottom.

nread@png.canwest.com

- This story can be heard online after 10:30 a.m. today at www.vancouversun.com/readaloud.

- - -

IN DANGER

Fish stocks from the tip of the Alaska Peninsula to the 49th parallel that have collapsed to less than 10 per cent of their original size:

Pacific ocean perch

Flathead sole

Coho salmon

Chinook salmon

King crab

Kamchatka flounder

Tonguefish

Butter clams

Righteye flounder

Pacific geoduck

Goatfish

Oolichan

Weathervane scallop

Dogfish shark

Flat oyster

Simpsons surf clam

Pacific razor clam

Octopus

Surf smelt

Pandalus shrimp

Skipjack tuna

Crangonid shrimp

Sand gaper

Rainbow trout

Tope shark

Penaeid shrimp

Basking shark

Pacific bluefin tuna

Angel shark

Charr

Bigeye tuna

Source: Reg Watson, University of B.C.

fisheries scientist

Stocks that are at 50 per cent or less of their maximum historic levels

Pacific herring

Yellowfin sole

Sockeye salmon

Pacific snow crab

Chum salmon

Black rockfish

Sablefish

Dungeness crab

Lingcod

Northern shrimp

Rock sole

Arrowtooth flounder

Piked dogfish

Greenland halibut

Pacific cupped oyster

Pacific Jack mackerel

Sea urchin

Northern prawn

Skate

Albacore

American shad

Chub mackerel

Sea cucumber

Californian anchovy

Sea mussel

West American sand sole

Squirrelfish

Pacific littleneck clam

Boxfish

Swordfish

Cockle

Curlfin sole

California flounder

Cupped oyster

Venus clam

Blue shark

Shortfin mako shark

SEAFOOD NEARLY GONE

The top seafood choices for Canadians:

1. Shrimp

2. Salmon

3. Tilapia

4. Trout

5. Oysters

6. Mussels

Ran with fact boxes "Seafood nearly gone" and "In danger",which have been appended to the end of the story.

CLOSE WINDOW