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## A global effort is needed before sea life is past the point of no return

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Historians don't have to look back very far to the days when the bounty of the oceans seemed without limit.

Now an international team of scientists has looked ahead and picked a date in the very near future when the seas around the world will contain nothing worth harvesting.

The team, which was led by Boris Worm from Dalhousie University in Halifax and included Reg Watson at University of British Columbia, poured over records going back a thousand years and concluded that for commercial fishing the end is nigh. Nigh, they say, based on a statistical analysis, is 2048.

That is the year when the populations of virtually every possible form of sea life worth gathering will have collapsed, which means at least 90 per cent of their numbers will be gone, leaving them with little chance of recovery. As individual species disappear, other interdependent life will follow. As a life form that depends on the sea for a good portion of our sustenance around the world, humans will not be unaffected.

The scientists' approach was theoretical. They looked at the trend and projected those lines into the future until there was nothing left to see. But we have watched enough stocks decline in our own local waters to know that the kind of collapse they predict is more than just a wild guess.

The study found that close to a third of fisheries around the world that were once viable have already collapsed. But the report, published this week in the journal *Science*, was not entirely apocalyptic in its outlook. The scientists' prediction is based on the trend lines continuing. If we stop overfishing, stocks can recover. It is still our choice as to whether we want barren seas lapping at our shores by the middle of this century.

So how do we change the future?

It won't be through better science. It's true that a better understanding of the way species depend on one another for survival gives us a clearer picture of the effects of certain fisheries. But this latest study is far from the first to use scientific methods to reinforce the story we have been watching unfold for decades at fish markets around the world.

No, maintaining life in the oceans that cover 70 per cent of our planet will be a test of our politicians, not our scientists.

The depletion of sea life is an international problem. Species are being threatened by overfishing, pollution and, in some cases, even global warming.

We can -- and we must -- do our bit at home, of course. We can try to take just the right number of salmon heading up our rivers. We can protect existing spawning grounds and rehabilitate others. But unless we can get meaningful international agreements to limit fishing in international waters, our efforts at home will not be enough.

Such agreements will not be easy to obtain. Witness Canadian Fisheries Minister Loyola Hearn's recent refusal to support a proposed United Nations moratorium on the technique of dragging nets across the bottom of lakes and oceans, a highly indiscriminate practice likened to clear-cutting the sea floor. We held back because it's a technique used in inshore waters in Canada.

But if we expect other countries, especially those in southeast Asia that send their fleets far and wide to mine the seas, to take a global view, we have to be willing to take the same approach here.

We still have that choice today. Tomorrow, it may be gone.

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