

Fishermen have lost the plot

By Charles Clover, Environment Editor

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No seafood by 2050, not even a tiddler? No North Sea cod, of course, which has pretty much gone already. But no Alaskan pollock, no New Zealand hoki, no Icelandic cod – some of the world's few fisheries that are currently certified as well managed? You've got to be kidding.

I have some sympathy with fishermen bridling at the projections splashed across the pages of Science, America's most authoritative science journal today. There is an element of the unbelievable about them.

But that's because they are just that, projections, not predictions. What scientists are saying is that by 2048 the world's currently exploited commercial fish and shellfish populations may be expected, on the basis of clear, established trends, to collapse to less than 10 per cent of their profusion in 1950.

advertisement Projections do not take into account the human race's ingenious ability to do things differently when staring disaster in the face. The value of projections is that they shows we are doing just that.

This is the first study to place a date on the collapse of the world's fisheries – which puts them in the same bracket as the world's wild orangutans and tigers which are variously estimated to have only a few years left. But it is not the only evidence that the world's fish populations are in trouble.

In a hugely important paper in 2002, Daniel Pauly and Reg Watson showed that the world's catches of wild fish peaked around 1989 and have been declining ever since, a fact masked until four years ago by the lies Communist China inserted every year into the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation's official statistics.

As a friend of mine said this morning, the significance of the story in Science today is not just in its predictions, or its recommendations that the world quickly sets up large marine protected areas.

Its prominence reflects the mounting frustration that ordinary citizens feel that one of the world's most important food resources is managed so badly.

And our total loss of faith that the global community of fishermen and fisheries ministers can sort out their act without outside intervention.

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