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Thu. Mar. 16, 2006. | Updated at 10:05 PM

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Could a little Bono help save the world's fish?

Overfishing a global problem Issue could use

a higher profile

Feb. 25, 2006. 01:00 AM

[PETER CALAMAI](#)

SCIENCE WRITER

ST. LOUIS, Mo.—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 said during a major scientific meeting here.

"Jacques Cousteau succeeded in making the ocean interesting but he did not succeed in showing how threatened it is," Pauly said.

Vast stretches of the ocean floor are the marine equivalent of terrestrial

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Marine biologist Jane Lubencho, a leading American activist for sustainable fishing, likes Pauly's idea of finding a charismatic spokesperson.

"The public needs someone who can break through the noise," she says.

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."

'This isn't a potential problem. The crisis has hit, the species are going down'

Daniel Pauly



Named after the cosmos flower, the prize has previously been awarded to luminaries such as British filmmaker Richard Attenborough and Pulitzer Prize-winning author Jared Diamond.

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

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. And the fact that there wasn't has nothing to do with bribery. "You don't need bribery if your officials believe that the industry is what they work for, if they believe the industry represents the best interests of the country."

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.

At the conference session here, the UBC researcher contrasted graphs of the landed catch from Canadian and Alaskan fisheries. After years of decline, the line on the Alaskan graph has levelled off in recent years — "they've taken action," he said — but the Canadian line was still plunging downward because overfishing had reduced stocks by so much that fishermen weren't able to catch their quotas.

'We need someone like a Bono or a Mandela who can speak directly to people'

Daniel Pauly

Rainer Froese told the meeting that 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, said Froese, a senior scientist at the Institute of Marine Research in Kiel, Germany.

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

Expansion of the statistical database continues this year with Pauly's sights set on teasing out how many fish are landed annually by small-scale fisheries, usually shore-based. He estimates this could add another 20 million tonnes to the actual global catch.

But he dismisses experts who say more research is needed to know exactly how much to tweak the quotas for each species.

"Scientists always say it's very complicated because they want more money. But 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.

He told a questioner at the science meeting that "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."

Pauly may sound like the ideal Bono of the Oceans but he rules himself out on the grounds that a stroke last year left him with a barely noticeable speech slurring.

Asked for other celebrity suggestions, he replied later by email noting that former *Cheers* actor Ted Danson is known for his ocean concerns and then concluded:

"The ideal person should be younger (It's going to be a long struggle!) and articulate. I am stumped."

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