

## Call for end to subsidies on deep-water trawling

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Fisheries experts and scientists have called for an end to subsidised deep-water trawling, which is stripping the oceans of slow-maturing "old growth" fish.

They told the American Association for the Advancement of Science annual meeting in San Francisco that government fuel subsidies enable "fishing fleets to operate like roving bandits, using state of the art technologies to plunder the depths."

The conference heard that fishing was virtually unregulated in international waters beyond individual countries' exclusive economic zones, with no agencies to monitor and control catches. Deep-water trawlers drag huge 15-tonne nets along the seabed, typically 500 to 1,000 metres below the surface. A damaging side effect of bottom trawling is the destruction of deep-sea corals and sponge beds that have taken centuries or millennia to grow.

The trawlers target fish such as orange roughy and grenadiers that grow extremely slowly in the cold ocean depths. In the southern ocean roughy reach sexual maturity when they are about 30 years old and they live to about 150, said Selina Heppell of Oregon State University.

"When you buy orange roughy you are probably purchasing a filet from a fish that is at least 50 years old," she added. "Most people don't think of the implications of that. Perhaps we need a guideline that says we shouldn't eat fish that are as old as our grandmothers."

Deep-water trawling is increasing as a direct result of overfishing in the traditional coastal and shallow waters, said Robert Steneck of the University of Maine. "All fisheries are turning gradually into deep-sea fisheries because they have fished them out of the shallow waters," he said. "The solution is not going into the deep-sea, but better managing the shallow waters where fish live fast and die young but ecosystems have a greater potential for resilience."

Ironically, however, a study by Rashid Sumaila and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre shows that bottom trawling is only profitable because of the heavy subsidies it receives from some governments.

Subsidies of more than \$150m a year are paid to deep-sea fisheries worldwide; Japan, Russia, South Korea and Spain are the biggest payers. Without these, global deep-sea fisheries would operate at a loss of \$50m a year, the study found.

Most of these subsidies are for fuel. Dragging the weighted nets out to the deep oceans consumes enormous amounts of fuel, said Prof Pauly: "There is surely a better way for governments to spend money than by paying subsidies to a fleet that burns 1.1bn litres of fuel annually to maintain paltry catches of old growth fish from highly vulnerable stocks, while destroying their habitat in the process."

"Eliminating global subsidies would render these fleets economically unviable and would relieve tremendous pressure on over-fishing and vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems," added Mr Sumaila.

There has been some progress, however, with international diplomacy to limit unsustainable fisheries. Earlier this month Japan, Korea, Russia and the US agreed to phase in a regional management regime for deep-sea fisheries in some vulnerable areas of the Northwest Pacific.

Last December the United Nations General Assembly agreed a new regime to regulate fisheries on the high seas. Many countries called for a moratorium on unregulated bottom trawl fishing but Canada, Iceland, Japan and Russia resisted. In the end, a compromise was reached that calls on high seas fishing nations to conduct environmental impact assessments of bottom fishing.

"Full implementation of this new UN General Assembly agreement plus an end to subsidies for deep-sea fisheries on the high seas is essential to conserving and protecting deep-sea ecosystems from unregulated high seas exploitation," said Matthew Gianni, a former trawlerman who runs the Deep-sea Conservation Coalition. "But it will take international cooperation and a real commitment on the part of the high seas fishing nations to make it happen."

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