



Breaking News  
Summary

Print Edition

Front Page

Report on Business

National

International

Sports

Arts & Entertainment

Editorials

Columnists



Full Services  
Index

Click for a detailed list of  
everything on the site.

Other Sections

Appointments

Births & Deaths

Comment

Education

Environment

Facts & Arguments

Focus

Health

Obituaries

Real Estate

Review

Science

Style

Technology

Travel

Weather

Leisure

Cartoons

Crosswords

Horoscopes

Movies

TV

PRINT EDITION

## A glimpse of an endangered undersea garden

By MARK HUME

Monday, May 14, 2007 – Page S1

VANCOUVER -- If you are not a diver the best place to get a sense of what's at stake in the growing debate about the trawl fishery is the Pacific Canada Pavilion, a stunning 260,000-litre exhibit at the Vancouver Aquarium which opens a window into the marine world off British Columbia's coast.

The first time you encounter the display you will probably stop and stare in wonder. There, just on the other side of a curving, clear Plexiglas wall, are schools of herring, giant halibut, wolf eels and salmon circling over an undulating garden of sea anemones, coral, kelp and other sea plants. It's a rich, engrossing and mesmerizing world that, although it concentrates a lot of life in a small area, is a true representation of what exists beneath the surface of the Pacific.

Next time you see this scene imagine a great tangled mess of nets, cables and weights being dragged over the magical undersea garden. Corals are shattered, sea cucumbers smashed, star fish sent spinning like hubcaps off a crashed car. When the dripping nets are extracted, bulging with fish, plumes of sediment and shards of broken sea life drift slowly back to the tank floor.

And now you are looking at a waste land.

This is what is happening to great stretches of sea floor along B.C.'s coast, where fleets of trawlers routinely drag their nets along the bottom.

"Bottom trawling and dredging has been likened to clear-cutting a forest merely to hunt its game," renowned University of British Columbia fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly, and Kyle Van Houtan, an environmental scientist at Duke University in North Carolina, state in a recent paper.

Dr. Pauly and Mr. Van Houtan last week drew to the world's attention a series of shocking photographs, taken by QuickBird satellite, that show great plumes of sediment trailing behind trawlers as their nets churn the bottom.

"Of the various ways to catch fish, trawling and dredging are considered particularly unsustainable," write Dr. Pauly and Mr. Van Houtan. "These fishing gears kill non-targeted benthic animals and destroy the structures they build (such as reefs), thus transforming communities with a rich, three-dimensional structure into flat, muddy areas with little biodiversity."

In B.C., says Jennifer Lash of the Living Oceans Society, about 70 ground-fish trawlers drag their weighted nets along the west coast of Vancouver Island.

They continue through Hecate Strait, inside Georgia Strait and on both coasts of the Queen Charlotte Islands.

Except for a few protected areas in Georgia Strait, and some closed waters over coral and sponge reefs in Hecate Strait, almost the entire coast is open to the trawl fleet.

"There's a ground-fish trawl and a shrimp-trawl fishery in B.C. We are most concerned about the bottom trawl. ... It is destructive in that it is basically clear-cutting the sea bed ... and dragging up tonnes and tonnes of fish and invertebrate by-catch."

By-catch refers to all the living things dredged up in the nets for which there is no commercial market or that the trawlers are not licensed to keep. Those creatures, badly damaged or already dead, are thrown overboard.

"We know there's a huge amount of by-catch. ... That would be things like corals, sponges, anemones, sea cucumbers - anything that's not a fish. Those are things we tend not to put any commercial value on," Ms. Lash says. "Unfortunately, we don't put any ecological value on them either. ... What we are doing is destroying the habitat and the ecosystems that support the commercial fish species we are trying to catch."

Between 1996 and 2002 the bottom trawl fleet discarded 68,000 kilograms of by-catch.

Living Oceans did an analysis of the by-catch, carefully parsing data to figure out what was caught and where. From that exercise they were able to identify 12 areas on the coast, which, if protected, would reduce the by-catch of corals and sponges by 80 to 90 per cent.

That wouldn't stop the destructive trawl fishery, but it would greatly limit the damage it does.

Unfortunately, the Living Oceans proposal has been ignored by the Department of Fisheries and Oceans and the trawl industry, says Ms. Lash.

"It's business as usual," she says.

"I think the problem is that very few people go beneath the ocean surface. So all that destruction is out of sight, out of mind."

Think about that next time you stand in front of the Pacific Canada Pavilion, and imagine that fantastical marine garden being turned into mulch.

[mhume@globeandmail.com](mailto:mhume@globeandmail.com)

[Return to Main national Page](#)

---

© 2003 Bell Globemedia Interactive Inc. All Rights Reserved.

