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Commentary

## We are fishing our oceans to death

Want to make a real difference? End fisheries subsidies, says CHARLES CLOVER

CHARLES CLOVER  
FROM TUESDAY'S GLOBE AND MAIL


Nearly all of the world's fish populations are in jeopardy from overfishing. If current trends continue, leading scientists project the collapse of the world's fisheries within the next 50 years. We may simply run out of fish.

Despite the increasingly alarming state of the world's fish populations, there are a handful of countries giving out massive subsidies that make things worse for fish -- and, eventually, for fishermen.

A new study by the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia found that, worldwide, fisheries subsidies total more than \$30-billion. At least \$20-billion directly support fishing operations, including the boats, equipment, and other costs that would otherwise be borne by the industry.

These subsidies have produced a global fishing fleet that is more than twice as large as what is needed to fish at sustainable levels.

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And, as fish stocks are found farther and farther away, fuel subsidies are increasingly doled out to cover the cost of the high seas trawling fleets.

We are fishing our oceans to death at taxpayers' expense. In the wake of this unprecedented crisis, trade ministers made a historic move and included fisheries subsidies on the agenda of the current World Trade Organization's Doha round of trade talks. This represents the first time that conservation concerns, specifically the problem of global overfishing and its implications on economic development and world trade, have resulted in the launch of a specific negotiation.

The fisheries subsidies negotiations are at a critical point and a draft fisheries subsidies agreement could be produced within months. A broad group of developed and developing countries, including New Zealand, Australia, and the United States are leading the charge in the WTO to strengthen trade rules to effectively curtail market-distorting and ecology-damaging subsidies to the fishing sector. As historic as the negotiations themselves is the broad support for these talks from free traders, environmentalists, business, and consumer interests.

Canada, an advanced nation that prides itself on its green and pro-environment outlook, would be the perfect advocate for eliminating these destructive subsidies. So the question is: Why isn't Canada a leader on something it knows so well? After all, Canada has had its own experience with overfishing nightmares. The Grand Banks disaster off of Newfoundland demonstrated just how badly fisheries policies can go wrong when the largest cod population in the world was destroyed by overfishing, inaccurate science and other factors. In 1992, Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans declared an indefinite moratorium on cod fishing and the world was shaken out of its complacent assumption that the sea's resources are limitless.

Fifteen years later, why has support for fisheries subsidies persisted in Canada? Four words: Fishermen vote, fish don't. This might be easier to accept if the ramifications were not so great, but we are not just talking about a regional development issue. Fear ought not to prevent us from achieving the largest single action we can take to protect the world's fisheries and the long-term health of the communities that depend on them. This is not about Canadian fishing subsidies, which are mere change compared to the big players in the subsidies racket. Japan, China, and the European Union, the world's top subsidizers, give out billions each year and their impact can be seen around the world, including in the overfishing problems in North American waters. This is about levelling the playing field for all fishermen, particularly Canada's and those of other countries who play fair.

I do not doubt that the majority of Canadians, even those living in cities far from the coasts, want to see fish in the oceans. If so, then it is important that the federal government know that. It is all about the impact Canada should have on these negotiations. A strong Canadian

position to ban subsidies that support overfishing is essential to achieving an effective outcome from the WTO. This is a global problem that we can solve as a global community.

*Charles Clover has been the environment editor of The Daily Telegraph (UK), since 1987. He is the author of The End of the Line: How Overfishing is Changing the World and What We Eat.*

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