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Call to halt fleet subsidies to save deep sea fish

James Randerson, science correspondent
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Scientists have called for subsidies paid out to a handful of national deep sea fishing fleets to be stopped immediately to prevent permanent ecological damage and the extinction of some of the longest living creatures on the planet.

Without the \$152m (£78m) of subsidies paid out annually, deep-sea fisheries would operate at a loss of \$50m. But the technologically advanced fleets are moving from place to place, fishing areas to extinction before moving on. The researchers said deep-sea species are particularly vulnerable because they reproduce slowly and so are not able to recover.

Elliott Norse, of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute in Bellevue, Washington, said: "Industrial fisheries are now going thousands of miles, thousands of feet deep and catching things that live hundreds of years in the process - in the least protected place on earth."

Daniel Pauly, at the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre, said: "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."

Most of the subsidies paid to the fleets buy cheap fuel, but governments also offer help with building boats, buying back old boats and tax breaks. Japan is the worst culprit, handing out nearly \$35m to deep sea fishermen annually, followed by Russia, South Korea, the Faroe Islands, Spain, Australia and Ukraine.

Fishermen use powerful ships to drag nets hundreds of metres below the surface. They employ GPS and shoal-finding radar to find the best places to trawl and by "flash-freezing" the catch they can stay out at sea for weeks.

Deep-sea ecosystems are vulnerable because in the colder, darker waters they are much less productive than shallower seas.

"We actually know very little about these species," said Selina Heppell, a fisheries biologist at Oregon State University. "The adaptation to living in a place like this is to slow down. They slow way down."

Biologists are concerned about orange roughy, grenadier, deep-sea rockfish, oreo and Patagonian toothfish among others. The orange roughy is so slow growing that it is not sexually mature until 34 years old. It can live to 150.

Trawling also destroys ancient habitats such as deep-sea cold water coral reefs. The coral *Lophelia* can live for 2,000 years. "But they can be removed from the deep sea in one trawl sweep," said Murray Roberts at the Scottish Association for Marine Science.

The corals also contain valuable data about past climate and ocean conditions - information that is lost when they are destroyed by bottom trawling.

Part of the problem is that much of the trawling takes place on the high seas where there are few regulations on fishing activity and virtually no enforcement. However, in December, the UN general assembly agreed measures to restrict deep-sea fishing. The list includes mandating fisheries to conduct an impact assessment before beginning to fish a new area.

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