

Scientists call for fuel subsidies ban to protect fish

By Nic Fleming, Science Correspondent, in San Francisco

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Scientists have called for a worldwide ban on fuel subsidies paid to deep-sea fishing boats that are putting vulnerable species at risk and damaging corals.

Because many types of fish are declining in shallow coastal waters across the world, fishing fleets are increasingly active in deep international waters.

Most of the high seas catch from deeper waters is carried out by bottom trawling which involves dragging massive nets along the sea bed – a practice which can destroy deep-sea corals and sponge beds that have taken centuries or millennia to grow.

Fish such as orange roughy, roundnose grenadiers, black scabbardfish and deep-water sharks live longer and reproduce later than shallow waters species, and so are more vulnerable to steep declines in populations.

Canadian researchers recently produced a report showing much deep sea fishing is only profitable because of subsidies.

Dr Rashid Sumaila and Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia calculated that without the £75 million in annual subsidies paid to deep-sea fishing vessels, the industry would lose £25 million per year from the practice.

Half of these payments are in the form of fuel subsidies.

Their report estimated that in the year 2000, the countries that paid out the highest deep-sea fishing fuel subsidies were Japan at £13 million, South Korea at £9 million, Russia with £8 million and Spain on £3.5 million.

Biologists, ecologists and economists at the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) conference in San Francisco called for action to reduce incentives for fleets to operate in deeper waters.

Economist Dr Sumaila said: "Eliminating global subsidies would render these fleets economically unviable and would relieve tremendous pressure on over-fishing and vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems.

"From an ecological perspective we cannot afford to destroy the deep-sea. From an economic perspective, deep-sea fisheries cannot occur without government subsidies.

And the bottom line is that current deep fisheries are not sustainable.”

In December the United Nations general assembly reached an agreement to regulate fishing in the high seas – international waters beyond the 200 nautical mile Exclusive Economic Zones of coastal countries.

As a result of the depletion of coastal fisheries, industrial trawlers as long as 600ft and equipped with flash freezers are dragging the sea floor at depths below a mile and staying at sea for months at a time.

Some skippers replace their nets with chains to rip up living corals that can date back as far as 1800 years.

Many countries including the UK and US called for a moratorium on unregulated bottom trawl fishing on the high seas.

Canada, Iceland, Japan and Russia resisted the call.

A compromise was reached with high seas fishing nations promising environmental impact assessments and the closure to fishing of areas with vulnerable species unless it can be proved fishing is doing no harm.

Robert Steneck, professor of marine science at the University of Maine, said: “The unregulated catches by these roving bandits are utterly unsustainable.

“With globalised markets, the economic drivers of over-fishing are physically removed and so fishermen have no stake in the natural systems they affect.

“While it may be a good short-term business practice to fish out stocks and move on, we now see global declines of targeted species.

“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.”

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