

EDITORIALS

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Muddying the waters

It's been a couple of months, so the sediment's had a chance to settle, as it were. Not that long ago, Canada was busily trying to keep the United Nations from moving to ban high seas bottom trawling, the federal rationale being that it would be hard to ban that kind of trawling outside Canada's 200-mile limit, and to then allow a similar technology inside Canadian waters.

The debate stirred up plenty of attention in this province, and in the end, the United Nations move couldn't garner enough support: Canada, bizarrely on side with the European Union countries, helped defeat the move.

Scientists argue that bottom trawling destroys fish habitat, and is only allowed to continue because it happens out of sight.

The reaction from the fishing industry was that a ban would cripple the fishery for many species.

And in the fray, some fishing company owners, like Clearwater's John Risley, went as far as to publicly suggest that there was no evidence whatsoever that bottom trawling did any damage.

Turns out, they're doing damage so severe that it can even be seen from space.

Thursday, satellite images of shrimp trawlers at work off China appeared in the journal Nature.

The pictures show huge mud plumes behind the trawl gear, mud that then settles back to the bottom and covers everything in the trawlers' wake.

The point fisheries scientist Daniel Pauly makes after seeing the photographs?

Bottom trawling may be great for shrimp, because it keeps food material available in the water column.

For almost every other species, though, it's a smothering death-warrant. Worms and other sea-bottom life are smothered by the falling silt, and life on the bottom rarely has enough time to start to recover before the next silt storm hits.

Plumes of mud left by the trawls destabilize life on the bottom, and after repeated trawling, the composition of the ocean floor changes from a material held rigid by different life forms - especially corals - into a kind of ooze that supports nothing. Then, storms and tidal currents move the already-loosened muck, causing more problems for anything else that might try to get a foothold on the ocean floor.

"I say it is like a geological force, because firm ocean bottoms are being turned into soft, oozy bottoms on a gigantic scale," Pauly told the Globe and Mail.

We're blasting the ocean floor to strip up surf clams, scraping it into jelly to catch shrimp, and we're wondering just why it is that ocean stocks like cod aren't recovering.

And the only way you can say you can't see the connection is if you are deliberately choosing to ignore it. We'll fish until the next species is gone, and then blame someone else - perhaps the scientists again, for not making clear how much damage we were doing, or the politicians, for not acting.

Stir up enough silt, and no one can get close enough to see the truth.

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