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OCEANS FROM CHEERS TO THE WTO

Sam Malone asks Canada to step up to the plate

The following is excerpted from a speech made by Cheers actor and Oceana board member Ted Danson to the Economic Club of Toronto on Tuesday.

You may ask why you've invited Sam Malone to talk to you about fish. I mean, I haven't even played a marine biologist on TV.

But I did get involved in ocean issues, in 1987. In 2001, our group, American Oceans Campaign, joined with others to form Oceana, the largest international organization focused on ocean issues.

Our oceans have reached a tipping point. Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia did a study that found that since the late 1980s the worldwide catch of fish has been declining – the first time in history this has happened.

The late, great scientist Ransom Myers, also from Canada, looked at the “big” fish – tuna, marlin and sharks – and found that 90 per cent are gone compared to 50 years ago. An international team, led by Boris Worm of Dalhousie University, found that nearly one-third of the world's commercial fisheries have collapsed from overfishing. Even more alarming, the study projects that all commercial fisheries could collapse within decades if current trends continue. Population levels are so low that the fishery may never come back – like the cod.

In short, we are fishing our oceans to death. Why is this important? We are talking about food security, about economic survival and about the health of our planet.

The good news is that this is a problem we can fix.

We need to stop overfishing and to stop fishing so destructively. We must stop using bottom trawls – boats that drag the ocean floor with huge nets, covering an area the size of the continental United States every year, and destroying the rocks and coral beds where little fish grow up into the bigger fish we enjoy eating.

Another problem is bycatch. We throw overboard 10 to 30 per cent of all the fish we catch. Boats after one kind of fish pull up turtles, sea birds, mammals, and other fish, then throw them back overboard – dead or dying.

But the biggest solution to all of these problems is eliminating the massive subsidies – estimated to be \$20-billion each year – which many of the world's governments give to their fishing fleets. To put that in context, world fishing revenue is about \$80-million to \$100-billion; what we are talking is about 25 per cent of the entire fishing industry.

Let me repeat – that's 25 per cent of the entire industry.

Some of the world's biggest fishing nations are the top subsidizers: the European Union, Japan, China, and Spain, whose large global fleets are the same ones Canada continues to have skirmishes with in the Atlantic.

Subsidies also disadvantage fishermen in countries like Canada that put money into beneficial activities such as fishery management and social and community programs.

What is Canada doing to stop the problem of subsidies? That's exactly what you should ask your government – because there is a critical opportunity for Canada to do something about this.

The World Trade Organization is right now negotiating new international trade rules to control fishing subsidies as part of its Doha round. But the world needs Canada. Canada should extend its leadership on international trade to help produce a strong WTO agreement that significantly reduces overfishing subsidies.

You have the best science, your fisheries are important to you economically and you are respected in the world trade community.

From Sam Malone's point of view, you need to step up to the plate.

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