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Until All the Fish Are Gone

Scientists have been warning for years that overfishing is degrading the health of the oceans and destroying the fish species on which much of humanity depends for jobs and food. Even so, it would be hard to frame the problem more dramatically than two recent articles in the Times detailing the disastrous environmental, economic and human consequences of often illegal industrial fishing.

Sharon LaFraniere showed how mechanized fishing fleets from the European Union and nations like China and Russia — usually with the complicity of local governments — have nearly picked clean the oceans off Senegal and other northwest African countries. This has ruined coastal economies and added to the surge of suddenly unemployed migrants who brave the high seas in wooden boats seeking a new life in Europe, where they are often not welcome.

The second article, by Elisabeth Rosenthal, focused on Europe's insatiable appetite for fish — it is now the world's largest consumer. Having overfished its own waters of popular species like tuna, swordfish and cod, Europe now imports 60 percent of what it consumes. Of that, half is contraband, fish caught and shipped in violation of government quotas and treaties.

The industry, meanwhile, is organized to evade serious regulation. Big factory ships from places like Europe, China, Korea and Japan stay at sea for years at a time — fueling, changing crews, unloading their catch on refrigerated vessels. The catch then enters European markets through the Canary Islands and other ports where inspection is minimal. After that, retailers and consumers neither ask nor care where the fish came

from, or whether, years from now, there will be any fish at all.

From time to time, international bodies try to do something to slow overfishing. The United Nations banned huge drift nets in the 1990s, and recently asked its members to halt bottom trawling, a particularly ruthless form of industrial fishing, on the high seas. Last fall, the European Union banned fishing for bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean, where bluefin have been decimated.

The institution with the most potential leverage is the World Trade Organization. Most of the world's fishing fleets receive heavy government subsidies for boat building, equipment and fuel, America's fleet less so than others. Without these subsidies, which amount to about \$35 billion annually, fleets would shrink in size and many destructive practices like bottom trawling would become uneconomic.

The W.T.O. has never had a reputation for environmental zeal. But knowing that healthy fisheries are important to world trade and development, the group has begun negotiating new trade rules aimed at reducing subsidies. It produced a promising draft in late November, but there is no fixed schedule for a final agreement.

The world needs such an agreement, and soon. Many fish species may soon be so depleted that they will no longer be able to reproduce themselves. As 125 of the world's most respected scientists warned in a letter to the W.T.O. last year, the world is at a crossroads. One road leads to tremendously diminished marine life. The other leads to oceans again teeming with abundance. The W.T.O. can help choose the right one.