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Tuna risks cod-like collapse: experts

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The collapse that decimated Canada's cod fishery could be repeated in tuna stocks around the world -- if steps aren't taken to improve conservation, scientists say.

And one expert contends that Canada can play a lead role educating other countries about the disastrous consequences of poor fishing practices, based on its own hard-learned lessons.

"The whole idea is to look at what happened to cod and say, 'What can we learn from this . . . to save tuna from going the same way?' " said Rashid Sumaila, a professor and environmental economist at the University of British Columbia.

Mr. Sumaila took part in a symposium this week called Last Best Chance for Tuna: Learning from the Cod Collapse.

It was part of the American Association for the Advancement of Science's annual meeting in Boston.

"Conventional fisheries wisdom did not work for the northwest Atlantic cod and is now failing for tuna in some cases," said Katharine Newman of the World Wildlife Fund in a news release.

At its peak in 1968, the landed value of cod in Atlantic Canada was \$1.4-billion. That value had dropped to \$10-million by 2004.

The cod fishery was closed in 1992, devastating the economy of Newfoundland and Labrador.

Mr. Sumaila said the landed value of several tuna populations in the Atlantic and Pacific oceans have already peaked, and are starting to decline.

The highly sought-after bluefin tuna -- a single large fish can be worth tens of thousands of dollars -- in the Mediterranean is in the most trouble.

Last year, European Union ministers voted to allow fishing for the endangered bluefin in the Mediterranean and Eastern Atlantic at twice the level scientists say will lead to the collapse of stocks.

"Bluefin is becoming the poster fish for bad management and imminent stock collapse," said Ernie Cooper, director of wildlife trade, for WWF Canada.

There are also warning signs for the bigeye and yellowfin stocks.

In 2001, the landed value of yellowfin tuna in the Western Central Pacific Ocean was US\$1.9-billion.

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Three years later, that total had dropped by more than 40 per cent to \$1.1-billion.

That fishing area -- Area 71 -- located near Indonesia and the Philippines, is heavily fished by neighbouring countries, as well as those with long-distance fleets, like the U.S., China and Japan.

A big part of the problem is the catching of fish that aren't fully grown, said Mr. Sumaila, who said a joint management strategy is badly needed.

Mr. Sumaila has developed a mathematical formula that factors the financial benefits of conservation into the economics of fisheries.

"Essentially, what this means is you can take your fish and do whatever you want to do with it, but don't take your grandchildren's fish."

Mr. Sumaila said any solution must take into account the poverty developing countries are facing, and offer them solutions that allow their fisheries to continue.

He said Canada's membership in the Asia-Pacific Economic Co-operation group gives it substantial clout.

"Canada may be in a good position to be able to say, 'Look here, you either fix this thing or you get into the kind of problems we have.' "

He said Canadian consumers can also pressure politicians to make sure catches arriving in local ports are coming from sustainable stocks, and make their own savvy decisions at the supermarket fish counter.

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