

Massive fishing fleets wiping out stocks

We aren't just emptying the larder, we're ransacking it as law of the sea unenforceable

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Special to the Sun

Saturday, February 23, 2008

I love to stand on a cliff near my home and gaze at the unending immensity and serene beauty of the Pacific Ocean.

But below the sea's surface it's another picture altogether. Fishing -- a huge and vital industry--is in crisis, and so are the oceans themselves. Fishing is carried out with ruthless intensity and mind-numbing destructiveness. And the marine environment is relentlessly being degraded.

OVERFISHING

The problem is simple. Professor Daniel Pauly, Director of University of British Columbia's Fishery Centre, says, "Supported by huge subsidies, existing fishing fleets are three to four times too large."

The era of big factory fishing took off after the Second World War, helped by technologies such as sonar and radar. Using refrigeration, fishing fleets now relentlessly trawl every corner of the globe, often dragging fishing lines over 100 kilometres long. Fish is now the most-traded animal commodity on the planet, with about 80 million tonnes caught each year, providing about 11 per cent of the world's protein.

But the total catch is declining -- down 13 per cent from 1994 to 2003 -- and fisheries are being wiped out. Cod and salmon have all but disappeared off eastern Canada, and salmon are struggling on the west coast. Large predator fish such as tuna, swordfish and marlin are almost extinct. Yet the hunt for tuna continues in a frenzy. In Japan, one tuna can fetch over \$100,000.

Many fishing techniques are appallingly destructive and wasteful. Bottom trawling and hydraulic dredging devastate the sea bottom habitat. (Yet Canada voted against the UN motion to ban bottom trawling.)

Gill nets continue to "ghost" fish the sea floor long after they are lost or abandoned--and many are.

"Bycatch," the euphemism for innocent fish, birds and turtles that are slaughtered along with targeted fish, accounts for about 30 per cent of the haul.

"The world's fisheries are in crisis," says marine biologist Boris Worm of Halifax's Dalhousie University and leader of an international research team. "At this rate all commercial seafood species will collapse by 2050," he says.

The outlook looks bleak, for the high seas are like the lawless wild west. Although the UN Law of the Sea applies to international waters, policing it is almost impossible.

The World Wildlife Fund estimates that an astounding 50 per cent of fish sold in Europe are illegally caught.

Nations such as Japan, Iceland and Norway ignore the 1986 international moratorium on commercial whaling, claiming their catch is for "scientific research." My hat's off to Greenpeace and the Sea Shepherd Society for their continuing fight against whaling.

We have a problem. Human population, and its appetite, is growing robustly but fish catches are decreasing. The shortcoming has been filled by "farmed" fish, which brings its own set of problems (I'll talk about them next month).

OCEAN DEGRADATION

The oceans are suffering. Water quality grows ever poorer, fouled by pollutants running off the land, dumped at sea or from oil tanker spills. Nutrients, mostly fertilizers and sewage, have created "dead

zones" in the world's oceans where oxygen levels are so low that marine life cannot survive. These zones are increasing quickly; there were about 250 at the end of 2007. The Gulf of Mexico dead zone, for example, which recurs each year off the Texas and Louisiana coasts, stretched to more than 22,000 square kilometres in 2007 -- about the size of New Jersey

For an iconic image, consider the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. It's a giant whorl of mostly plastic trapped in a giant gyre in the Pacific Ocean. Growing constantly, the garbage island weighs about 3.2 million tonnes and is twice the size of Texas! As the plastics break into smaller pieces they are eaten by birds and fish, slowly starving them.

Fossil fuel emissions, the culprits behind global warming and acid rain, are also warming and acidifying oceans. Acidic seawater is toxic to eggs and developing fish, and inhibits the ability of corals, certain plankton and other animals to build shells. Since 1980, about 20 per cent of coral reefs, the rainforests of the sea, have disappeared, and warming waters are threatening salmon on our west coast.

WHY?

Even a blind man can see that we aren't just emptying this immense larder of replenishing protein. Even worse, we're violently wrecking it as though on some crazed home invasion. How can we possibly be so stupid?

I have a horrible feeling of helplessness; there are simply too many people on the globe. Countries such as Japan are desperate for food, so can we blame them for sending their fishing fleets to scour the oceans?

I worry about the inability of humans to work together on the international level. Instead of cooperating to nurture the oceans and maintain sustainable catches -- surely not that difficult a task -- we resort to greed and primitive tribalism.

WHAT TO DO?

Some positive steps have been taken. Nations have extended their control of fishing to 200 nautical miles off shore. Fish, however, don't recognize this invisible line.

In 2007, the United States passed the Magnuson-Stevens Act that makes it illegal to overfish and also limits the amount of bycatch. This appears to be working and other nations are looking to change their fishing regulations.

The ultimate solution would be to cut back fishing fleets. John Reynolds, a marine biologist at Simon Fraser University says the world need to end the "environmentally perverse subsidies," which have reached \$30 billion dollars globally. The World Trade Organization has proposed to eliminate most fishing subsidies but little has been done to date.

Illegal fishing must be dealt with. Desperately needed are effective international laws and organizations.

We can all pitch in by making informed choices in restaurants and supermarkets. The Seafood Watch program issues pocket guides that help consumers select sustainable seafood (www.montereybayaquarium.org).

The ocean crisis raises another issue: There are simply too many mouths to feed on this planet. Perhaps it's time we focussed on curbing population growth.

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