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Tuesday, 9th June 2009



## ASK THE EXPERT **Trawling for hope**

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A trawler leaves Eyemouth. According to a new film, this could be a thing of the past by 2050

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**Published Date:** 08 June 2009

ON World Oceans Day, a new film claims there will be no fish left in the seas by 2050. **Roger Cox** finds out what the Scottish fishing industry thinks of this dire prediction

RUPERT Murray's new film *The End of the Line* makes for sobering viewing. Based on the book of the same name by British journalist Charles Clover, it claims that unless urgent action is taken to reduce the size of the world's fishing fleet, there could be no more fish in the sea by 2050. Amid scenes of giant supertrawlers wreaking havoc on already barren-looking seabeds and thrashing bluefin tuna being hacked at with fish hooks, scientists queue up to make dramatic statements and dire predictions

"The amount of fishing power that we have at our command today far outweighs our ability to control ourselves," says Professor Callum Roberts of the University of York.

"We are fighting a war against fish," says Dr Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia, "and we are winning."

The film ends with the appeal: "Tell politicians: respect the science, cut the fishing fleet." But should that be the rallying cry of environmentalists here in Scotland? After the extensive decommissioning programmes of the past decade, do we really need to reduce the size of our fleet yet again?

"Absolutely," says Charles Clover. "What has happened to North Sea cod is a total disaster. Nobody wants to talk about it here, but if you ask a North American scientist, they'll say it's something in the order of a 90 per cent plus decline. If this was America, the North Sea would be designated a fishing disaster area. By law, (large areas of it) would have to be ruled out for fishing."

Unsurprisingly perhaps, senior figures in the Scottish fishing industry disagree with Clover's assessment.

"What Charles Clover is doing is entering into a discourse of danger," says Mike Park, executive chairman of

the Scottish White Fish Producers' Association. "He is trying to promote the crisis and he's picking up on figures that promote that agenda more strongly than any other figures he can pick up. He's saying 'Let's make this a crisis and then people will take it on board.'"

Bertie Armstrong, chief executive officer of the Scottish Fishermen's Federation, says: "There is a tendency to dramatise and generalise about the state of the oceans. That's fairly obviously deliberate in this case, because it will attract a bigger audience (for the film). I think the film's slogan, 'the devastating truth about what's happening to our oceans', says it all.

"The problem for us in the fishing industry is that it is entirely possible for those who wish to, to over-generalise and be superficial on the matter. The United Nations figures saying that 80 per cent of the world's fisheries are in decline is one thing, and no doubt these figures are verifiable in global terms. However, what we can talk about in Scotland is the story here. Any recovery from a bad position has to start somewhere, and we are delighted to report that a recovery has been going on for some time now."

The "bad position" Armstrong refers to is the decline in North Sea fish stocks since commercial fishing started up again in earnest after the enforced hiatus of the Second World War. First to go were the herring fisheries, which collapsed in the 1970s and had to be closed. Then came the most high-profile crash of all: cod. There are no reliable pre-war figures for cod numbers in the North Sea, so it's difficult to say exactly how severe the drop has been. In his book, Clover estimates that we have lost "around 90 per cent of the cod that 'should' be there".

The picture is also complicated by an event known as the Gadoid Outburst, which saw a sudden and inexplicable increase in the number of gadoid species (cod, herring and whiting) in the North Sea in the late 1960s and early 1970s, followed by a sudden decrease. The Scottish white fish fleet, which had grown rapidly to make the most of the boom years, was suddenly far too large. This overcapacity was tackled most aggressively in 2001 and 2003, when two costly rounds of decommissioning saw the whitefish fleet reduced by 65 per cent.

In spite of this drastic action, however, stocks remain depleted. In 2003, intergovernmental marine research organisation the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) listed all the major bottom-dwelling species in the North Sea – cod, plaice, monkfish and soul – as "outside safe biological limits". It also called not only for a ban on fishing for cod, but on fisheries that catch cod in their nets as by-catch. Controversially, the EU failed to act.

Both Park and Armstrong freely admit that mistakes have been made by the Scottish fishing industry in the past ("largely down to ignorance rather than cavalier behaviour", says Armstrong). However, both are adamant that there are now reasons to be optimistic.

Armstrong points to the voluntary introduction of "real-time closures" as a major step in the right direction. "If fishermen in a certain area find they are catching too many fish that they shouldn't be catching for sustainability reasons (ie cod), then they call it in and that area gets closed for three weeks.

"This year, that moved away from a voluntary scheme to a regulatory scheme and I've just received an e-mail to say that the 56th area closure of this year has just been applied, for reasons of sustainability.

"Also, we're working very hard indeed on selective gear. Take Scottish langoustines. Fishermen don't want to catch whitefish with those nets, so there are panels put in the nets so that the langoustines are retained and the whitefish can swim up out of the top of the net." Park adds that boats in the whitefish fleet are also adopting cod-selective gear. "Cod dive when they enter a net," he says, "so we're putting large mesh in the bottom of the nets, which then allows cod to escape. We can reduce our impact on cod by 60-70 per cent by using these avoidance devices."

On a modest scale at least, these measures seem to be having the desired effect. Armstrong says stocks of both cod and mackerel have been increasing recently. Haddock numbers, meanwhile, are more or less static.

"Haddock was in a recovery plan, but it has passed out of a recovery plan and is now in a long-term management plan," he says. "That's something which is really the holy grail of fisheries management. When

the year's science comes in and there's a bit more, fishermen can have a bit more; if there's a bit less they can have a bit less."

Even Charles Clover can see some positives in the future of the Scottish fishing industry.

"In terms of the minds of the fishermen, the attitudes of the fishermen, we turned a corner a couple of years ago when they said they would offer to fish with more selective methods," he says. "I thought that really was the moment where the fishermen decided to take responsibility. They need to make the whole process much more scientifically rigorous though, they need to now demonstrate that what they're doing is actually conserving fish."

According to Park, these figures should be ready soon. "Obviously the changes we've made are very recent," he says. "We're just adapting fishing practices to reduce our impact on cod stocks, but this year we'll be providing more robust science on the difference that's making."

"For example, we think that our real time closures this year – of which we should have about 150 by the end of the year – will save in the region of 5,000 tons of cod."

Clearly, then, the Scottish fishing industry is working hard to manage its remaining resources responsibly. So what of the claim made in *The End of the Line* that we could literally run out of fish by 2050? Armstrong thinks it's simply junk science.

"The enormous superficiality of that statistic is that if you take any graph which has a slope on it, and that slope is going down, if you extrapolate from that you have to conclude that at some stage it will hit the y-axis and there will be nothing of whatever it was."

"In the 1960s, when the Baby Boom was in full swing and the population was exploding, the prevalent scare story was that we'd all have one square foot of land to stand on by the year 2015 – again, the perfectly ridiculous and superficial extrapolation of a curve. There will still be fish by 2050. I can confidently predict that, because we are doing things about it."

- The End of the Line is on selected release from 12 June, [www.endoftheline.com](http://www.endoftheline.com)

&149 There will be discussions after three screenings at the Edinburgh Filmhouse, supported by Take One Action, featuring the following guest speakers: Louize Hill, marine policy officer, WWF Scotland (12 June); Roy Brett, Hotel Chef of the Year, and Laura Stewart, Marine Stewardship Council (14 June); Charles Clover and Kara Brydson of RSPB Scotland (16 June). Visit [www.filmhousecinema.com](http://www.filmhousecinema.com) for details

## **SUSTAINABLE FISHING**

In recent years, the Scottish fishing fleet has implemented a range of measures to help ensure the long-term sustainability of fish stocks. These include:

- Two large decommissioning schemes in 2001 and 2003, which resulted in a 65 per cent reduction in the Scottish whitefish fleet. According to the Scottish Fishermen's Federation (SFF), "further decommissioning schemes, subject to careful analysis of need, remain a possibility".
- The voluntary introduction of real-time closures. If fishermen discover large concentrations of juvenile or spawning fish, or of a species of fish they are trying to protect (ie cod), they pass that information on and the area they have been fishing in is closed down for three weeks. So far in 2009, there have been 56 such closures in Scottish waters.
- Trialling, developing and adopting a range of fishing gear measures that allow under-sized and unwanted fish species to escape. These include the introduction of increased mesh sizes in nets and the addition of escape panels in trawls.
- Working more closely with government and marine scientists to ensure efficient stock monitoring. Over the last year, the SFF has placed four extra fisheries observers on fishing vessels to assist with data gathering.

- Participation in independent eco-label certification schemes such as the Marine Stewardship Council sustainability awards. The Scottish fishing industry has already had several of its stocks – including mackerel, herring and two of the langoustine stocks – awarded the MSC "blue tick". Most of the remaining stocks, including haddock, are now in the accreditation process.

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- **Last Updated:** 07 June 2009 6:37 PM
- **Source:** The Scotsman
- **Location:** Edinburgh
- **Related Topics:** [Sea fishing industry](#)

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