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Sea of troubles as search for wild fish pushes into final frontier

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WASHINGTON: Global fisheries have expanded so rapidly over the past 50 years that the world is running out of places to catch wild fish, according to a study conducted by researchers in Canada, the United States and Australia.

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The findings, published in the online journal *PLoS ONE*, are the first to examine how marine fisheries have expanded geographically over time. Looking at fleets' movements between 1950 and 2005, the five researchers charted how fishing has been expanding southward into less exploited seas at roughly one degree latitude each year in order to compensate for the fact that humans have depleted fish stocks closer to their shores in the northern hemisphere.

During that period, the world's catch increased fivefold from 19 million tonnes in 1950 to 90 million in the late 1980s, before declining to 87 million in 2005. It was 79.5 million in 2008, according to the UN Food and Agriculture Organisation, the most recent year for which figures are available.

Daniel Pauly, a co-author who serves as principal investigator of the Sea Around Us Project at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, said the global seafood catch is dropping "because there's essentially nowhere to go". The fact that fish catches rose for so many decades "looks like sustainability but it is actually expansion-driven. That is frightening, because the accounting is coming now."

The authors - including lead author and UBC doctoral student Wilf Swartz and National Geographic Society ocean fellow Enric Sala - write that this relentless pursuit for seafood has left "only unproductive waters of high seas and relatively inaccessible waters in the Arctic and Antarctic as the last remaining 'frontiers'."

"The focus should move from looking for something new to looking at what we have and making the most sustainable use out of it," Mr Swartz said.

The research could provide new ammunition to those seeking to curb fishing of some of the world's most imperiled species. Last week, negotiators at the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas - which oversees dozens of fish stocks in the Atlantic Ocean - imposed new restrictions on vulnerable species such as oceanic whitetip and hammerhead sharks but stopped short of making deep cuts in the annual catch of imperiled bluefin tuna in either the eastern or western Atlantic.

But nations that have traditionally sought out the most seafood, or depend on it as a primary food resource, are resisting steep cuts in quotas. A spokesman for Japan's Fisheries Agency said when the issue of these restrictions come up, "we look at actual situations of each kind of marine resources, and those that need protection we will protect, and with those species that are scientifically proved to not need over-protection, we will act accordingly".

The US National Fisheries Institute spokesman, Gavin Gibbons, said the depletion of wild fisheries helps explain why farmed fish now account for about half of the world's seafood production.

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This story was found at: <http://www.smh.com.au/environment/sea-of-troubles-as-search-for-wild-fish-pushes-into-final-frontier-20101203-18jvh.html>