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Grim days for fisheries as ocean catch dries up

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GLOBAL fisheries have expanded so rapidly over the past half-century that the world is running out of places to catch wild fish, according to a new study by researchers in Canada, the US and Australia.

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 to compensate for the fact that humans have depleted fish stocks closer to their shores in the northern hemisphere.

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

Co-author Daniel Pauly said the global seafood catch was 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 University of British Columbia 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 new analysis could reinforce the case of those seeking to curb fishing of some of the world's most imperilled species.

Last week, negotiators at the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas 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 imperilled bluefin tuna in either the eastern or western Atlantic.

"People are beginning to look at science and understand if we don't start managing these fisheries properly we're going to be in trouble, not only because of ecological reasons, but because they're important sources of food and income," said Russell Smith from the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration.

But some of the nations that have traditionally sought out the most seafood, or depend on it as a primary food resource, are resisting steep cuts in fishing quotas.

A spokesman for the Japanese Fisheries Agency's international affairs division said when the issue of these restrictions came 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 overprotection, we will act accordingly."

National Fisheries Institute spokesman Gavin Gibbons, whose group is the largest seafood trade organisation in the US, said the

global depletion of wild fisheries helped explain why farmed fish now accounted for roughly half of the world's seafood production. But he noted that it was still important to make distinctions between fish stocks. "There's no need to stop commercial fishing in all oceans," he said.

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