

Empty Oceans: Avoiding a Global Fishing Crisis

The world's fisheries are in crisis.

A technological revolution that has made boats capable of catching more fish than ever before, a population explosion on the coasts, subsidies of fishing fleets in developed countries, and a steadily rising demand for fish products have combined to create a global over-fishing problem, says World Bank Environmental consultant John Virdin.

A quarter of the world's major fisheries are currently over-fished and could end up on the endangered list:

- Coral reef Napoleon wrasse
- Patagonian toothfish
- Atlantic toothfish
- Basking shark
- Whale shark

Another 40% are estimated to be fully-fished and twenty percent of freshwater fish are either extinct, threatened or vulnerable. In addition, the survival of numerous species, including marine mammals, turtles, seabirds and invertebrates is menaced by fishing, habitat loss and pollution.

The Commercial Conundrum

Most of the world's fish come from waters controlled by low and middle-income countries—caught in large quantities by boats from developed countries, which subsidize their fishing industries up to US \$20 billion per year.

The pressure from industrial fleets has been compounded by a quadrupling of the number of people fishing. The extra numbers are comprised mostly of small, non-industrial fishers in developing countries seeking food, or to supplement their incomes.

The steady increase in fishing fleets is mirrored by the steady decline in fisheries and everyone is working harder to keep their catch rates

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THINK ABOUT IT

The Price of Over-Fishing

Over the past 50 years, cod, tuna and groupers population has been reduced by about 90%.

A quarter of the world's major marine fisheries are over-fished and 40% are fished to capacity.

In Asia, the cumulative weight of the fish (biomass) living off its coastal waters is estimated to be 8–12% of what it was a century ago.

In South East Asia, 88% of coral reefs are at risk from human damage.

The looming collapse of fisheries threatens the most important source of food for 250 million people.

steady. Hauls of the most popular fish have actually been falling since 1988. In the past 50 years, the number of cod, tuna, groupers and sharks is estimated to have fallen 90%.

As the big fish disappear, fishers are being forced to “fish down the food chain” to keep their nets full. Without a concerted effort by the global community, the health of the world’s oceans and most significant inland waterways will be irreversibly damaged. Developing countries, who rely heavily on fish exports for foreign exchange earnings, will be hit hardest, with some 30 million of the world’s poorest growing poorer still.

Sustainable Solutions

Developing countries face a major challenge in creating strategies to manage who may fish in their waters, how often, how much can be caught at one time, and what fees or tariffs must be paid.

A key element to any plan is to build domestic support for:

- Capping catch levels at sustainable levels
- Restocking species where necessary
- Protecting spawn areas
- Finding alternative livelihoods for excess fishers

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The Time to Act Is Now

The good news is that it is not too late to reverse the crisis. The latest scientific evidence suggests that action now, using methods and approaches that have already proven successful in some areas, could allow most of the threatened eco-systems to—at least partly—recover. It is even conceivable that in 10 years, catches could begin to increase if fishing is brought down to a sustainable level now.

A sustainable global fishing industry is vital to protect the incomes of some of the world’s poorest people, as well as to preserve fishing fleets in developed countries. Without it, the world’s oceans and one of man’s most important food sources are at risk.