

Hooked On Fishing And Were Heading For The Bottom

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The world has passed "peak fish" and fishermen's nets will be hauling in ever diminishing loads unless there's political action to stem the global tide of over fishing, says a fisheries expert based at the University of British Columbia. Dr. Daniel Pauly says the crisis in the world's fisheries is less about scientific proof than about attitude and political will.

And, he says, the world's fish need a dynamic, high-profile political champion like a Bono or Mandela to give finned creatures the public profile of cute and furry ones.

"It's time for leadership on global fisheries issues. It's time to act," says Dr. Pauly, Director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada. "We don't need more science. This is a message that's different from many of my colleagues. Of course we need to learn more about fish. But research is often publicly funded on the grounds that this is an alternative to other political action. We know enough to act to prevent the continued decimation of global fisheries."

Dr. Pauly will be presenting his views as part of a symposium on international scientific cooperation for the transition to sustainable development at the annual meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science February 17 in St. Louis.

Dr. Pauly is the principal investigator of the Sea Around Us project. Based at U.B.C.'s Fisheries Centre, and sponsored by the U.S.-based Pew Charitable Trusts, the Sea Around Us is the world's most ambitious

attempt to document and assess the fate of global fisheries. Using specialized software and fisheries data from around the world, the project maps global marine fisheries activity since 1950. This reveals local, regional and global trends in past and present fisheries practices. (The detailed data are publicly available at www.seaaroundus.org.)

Among its most notable findings, the research has revealed that the world passed "peak fish" – a peak in the biomass, or weight, of fish caught from the world's oceans – in the late 1980s. Since then, while there have been regional variations, the global fish haul has gradually sunk.

"There's no doubt about this," says Dr. Pauly whose findings have been published in the world's leading peer-reviewed journals, including Science and Nature. "We're in a phase where increasing fishing effort produces less catch."

While global catches peaked in the late 1980s, the peak occurred earlier in those parts of the world where industrial fishing developed first. Thus, peak fish occurred in the mid-1970s in the North Atlantic, exploited by European and North American fisheries. In the southern Atlantic, where the industrialization of fishing started later, peak fish occurred in the mid-1990s.

Dr. Pauly is adamant that pulling back from a global fisheries collapse – one on par with the collapse of various regional fisheries, such as the Atlantic cod fishery off Canada's Newfoundland coast – requires recognizing what he describes as a deep divide between the fishing industry and those who eat fish. He argues that fisheries companies' actions show that they're primarily interested in maximizing short-term profit, with little or no regard for the long-term sustainability of fish stocks.

"The industry is ready to commit suicide at any time," he says. "It's an industry that needs to be reined in for its own good."

He notes that the global fisheries industry is very complex. According to Dr. Pauly, it operates with "one foot deep in illegality," by landing illegal catches, and skirting existing laws through the use of tools such as flags of convenience. And, he says, public policy on marine fish conservation issues is distorted by the fact that most governments view fishing companies, and not their citizens, who actually are the true owners of the resources, as their main constituency.

While the situation is dire, Dr. Pauly believes this situation can be turned around. He believes that a reduction of excess fishing capacity, the creation of "no-take zones" covering about 20 per cent of habitats, and political enforcement of sustainable fishing levels will result not just in pulling back from the brink, but more fish for our tables.

"The irony is that reducing fishing actually increases the catch in the long term," says Dr. Pauly. "Public policy must be downsizing the industry to a level that allows for sustained catch and stocks to rebound."

This past October, Dr. Pauly was awarded the prestigious 2005 International Cosmos Award. The award recognizes exemplary research that "promotes the harmonious co-existence of nature and mankind." Dr. Pauly, 59, has authored or co-authored more than 500 scientific articles, book chapters and shorter contributions, and authored, or (co-)edited about 30 books and reports. He was elected to the Royal Society of Canada in 2003.

He says receiving the prize was one additional push to move his message from the open sea to the political beachhead. But he emphasizes that research alone won't solve the crisis. It's time for dramatic political leadership to move from a global marine tragedy to a future with

bountiful fish.

Says Dr. Pauly: "Reclaiming the ocean and its resources from excessive use will be a key task for humanity in the 21st century."

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