

## Opinion & Analysis

# Out of our depth in tackling overfishing disaster



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Consumers are unaware of the havoc overfishing is producing

**T**HERE'S PLENTY more fish in the sea." It's a familiar line, but is that old truism still in fact true?

Oceans, rivers and lakes cover well over two-thirds of the Earth. The great oceans are so vast that it has long been felt that nothing we could do could possibly have any serious long-term impacts on these immense systems.

This is demonstrably not the case. The damage wrought on the world's seas and oceans is already so acute that, in the words of a United Nations expert: "The recovery from the changes we're making will probably take a million years."

That's the considered view of Achim Steiner, executive director of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

A lethal cocktail of climate change, overfishing and pollution is causing severe strains on fish stocks worldwide, with the total collapse of commercial fish stocks now predicted to be just four decades away.

During this same period, world population – barring disasters – will continue its seemingly unstoppable march, increasing at

the rate of 80 million a year from its current level of 6.7 billion to approach 10 billion by mid-century.

Right now, one in three of the world's population depends directly on fish for much of their protein. The threatened collapse in world fisheries will be calamitous for them, not to mention the three billion additional people who will be clamouring for dwindling food sources in the next three or four decades.

It's a crisis of epic proportions, and the UN experts say we are truly out of our depth. According to UNEP's recently published report, called *In Dead Water*, climate change has compounded other problems such as overfishing and pollution, while rising ocean temperatures are killing off the world's great coral reefs.

This in turn threatens the spawning grounds of tuna and countless other species. Climate change is also shifting ocean currents and with them the plankton and small fish which support the ocean food chains.

Another dangerous effect of the billions of tons of CO<sub>2</sub> human activity dumps into the

atmosphere every year is that much of it is absorbed by the oceans, which are now both warming and becoming more acidic. This disrupts, for example, the ability of shellfish to form their shells.

Collapses in one or several species in any ecosystem can trigger calamitous chains of events, and these are now unfolding rapidly in the world's oceans. It is a classic case of "the tragedy of the commons".

Because most of the world's seas are not owned by any one nation, there are few if any "rules", and these are rarely enforced. This leads to a free-for-all in which giant trawlers using advanced electronics are able to locate, intercept and wipe out entire fisheries.

Once the fish in one area have been exterminated, the fleets simply move to the next zone, and so on. In 2005, over 125 million tons of fish were taken from the seas. Subsidies make things even worse. The EU, for instance, spends hundreds of millions of euro to buy its fishermen the right to "access" distant fisheries.

Globally, fishing is subsidised to the tune of

tens of billions of dollars a year. This has funded a doubling of the tonnage of the global fishing fleet between 1970 and 1995 – at the very time of maximum threat of fisheries collapse. We as taxpayers are directly subsidising the mass extinction of marine life.

As the slaughter intensifies, and stocks dwindle, new techniques have been developed to allow even the deep sea species to be caught. This has delivered "exotic" and expensive new species such as roughy, blue hake and grenadier to our tables, and added to the illusion that there's plenty of fish if you just know where to look.

This new bonanza comes at a terrible price. Many deep-sea fish can live to the age of 60 and may not reach sexual maturity (just like humans) until well into their teens. They are therefore far more vulnerable to being overfished. Ireland has the dubious honour of commissioning the world's biggest trawler, *Atlantic Dawn*. It can kill and store 7,000 tons of fish every time it takes to sea. Its nets are 3,600 feet wide and 550 feet deep (in comparison, Dublin's Liberty Hall, is just 195

feet tall). Ships of this scale sweep every form of marine life in their path, and the by-catch (ie, unwanted species) is tossed back dead into the sea. We as consumers are mostly unaware of the havoc that our taste for marine delicacies is fuelling. Governments, including our own, bend to powerful fishery lobby groups rather than vague consumer unease. The Taoiseach, Bertie Ahern, personally wrote to the EU Commission asking that it bend its rules in favour of *Atlantic Dawn*.

Unless a radical conservation-led approach to managing the world's fisheries is quickly put into place with binding and enforced international agreements, the calamity will not be limited to the marine ecosystem.

If we simply to carry on our current path, "market forces" will, left unchecked, do the rest and complete the maritime holocaust exactly as scientists are predicting.

We are, as a fisherman might say, nearing the end of the line.

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