

Oceans require conservation plan

BY REESE HALTER, SPECIAL TO THE STARPHOENIX MARCH 26, 2010

The following is the viewpoint of Halter, a conservation biologist at Cal Lutheran University and founder of the international conservation institute Global Forest Science.

The Chinese, Japanese and Russians will not support a world measure to stop overfishing sharks, and the United Nations will not unanimously protect the endangered Atlantic bluefin tuna. So it's now up to the citizens of our planet to help nature.

Fish is an important source of low-fat protein and vitamins. The omega-3 fatty acids found in fish are brain food, reduce heart attacks and strokes, and slow the symptoms of arthritis and osteoporosis in humans.

Since the 1850s, overfishing has changed life under the sea. Northern cod, North Sea skate, marbled rock cod of Antarctica and bluefin tuna are fished out, like the great whales before them, and these stocks are not recovering. Sharks, rays and seahorses are on the road to extinction. East Coast cod has declined by 96 per cent over the past 150 years.

Researchers from the University of New Hampshire believe that haddock, herring, mackerel, yellowtail flounder and winter flounder have also declined as much as cod populations. Since the mid-19th century, more than 90 per cent of the pre-industrial population of large, spawning fish has vanished.

Fish biologists at the University of British Columbia discovered that the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), which has reported global catches yearly since 1950, in fact began to see the problem in the 1980s. Yet it took 12 more years in order for this to become public.

The FAO reported 40 million tonnes of catch in 1950 and by the early 1990s it was 80 million tonnes. The trend continued despite the Newfoundland and Grand Banks collapses in the early 1990s. The total reported world harvest rose to 100 million tonnes by 2000.

The reason for the enormous and grossly unsustainable numbers was due to false reporting by China. Since 1988 the actual decline has been at least 635,000 tonnes a year.

Essentially, the sea is becoming empty of older fish that are vital for reproduction.

For example, plaice is harvested by the time it reaches six years old, yet these fish are able to live for 40 years.

Extreme fishing pressures on cod and haddock have resulted in these fish breeding one year earlier - a rare example of human-induced evolution.

Fishing technology today enables fishermen to hunt anywhere, with a high accuracy of catch. Over the past 30 years humans have begun hunting deep, greater than 1,000 metres into the ocean. Now ling, tusk, Greenland halibut and blue whiting are all fair game.

As a result, all known commercial deep-sea fish populations have fallen to around 20 per cent of the 1970s levels.

One of the most prized and rare fish left on the globe is the bluefin tuna. It accelerates faster than a Ferrari and warms its blood through an ingenious heat exchange system. Eastern Atlantic bluefin is an endangered species and western Atlantic bluefin is worse off; it's listed as critically endangered.

The FAO estimates that there are about 1,556 long-line fishing vessels of a freezing capacity larger than 90 tonnes catching tuna around the world. At 3.6 million tonnes of tuna harvested annually, the populations are all set to crash.

Conserving the oceans' resources are clearly the only way forward in this century. An innovative, sustainable approach to harvesting fish in Iceland and elsewhere is that of individual transferable quotas that enable boats to own shares of an overall quota determined by scientists.

The Marine Stewardship Council certification of sustainable fisheries that McDonald's (which serves more than 275 million fish sandwiches in North America annually), Unilever and Wal-Mart have adopted is helping to protect the oceans from piracy.

Satellite monitoring, naval and marine support with harsh penalties including enormous fines and stiff jail sentences will reduce the actions of large pirate fleets from Spain and Russia.

Underwater reserves in New Zealand, New England, St. Lucia, Florida and the Bahamas clearly show the awesome ability over time of the ocean to regenerate its fish populations. However, biologists predict that 50 per cent of the ocean will need to be placed in reserve in order to feed 10 billion people by 2050.

Each of us can make a huge difference with our buying habits. As voters and consumers, we can exercise a unanimous voice for the conservation of all wild fish stocks and life within the ocean.

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