



FACT SHEET

WORLD FISHERIES IN CRISIS

Factsheet No.23

THE CAUSE OF THE CRISIS

The reason that the fisheries of the world have now reached a state of crisis is simple - fish are being taken from the sea faster than they can reproduce.

The focus of fisheries management has always been development and exploitation with governments spending US\$54 billion per year to subsidise the industry, allowing it to continue to meet its short-term needs. The reaction is exactly opposite to action required to pave the way towards a solution - instead of scaling fishing fleets down to allow dwindling fish stocks to recover, governments are supplying the industry with funds to build bigger, more efficient boats to catch more fish.

BYCATCH

Bycatch is the product that is discarded when certain types of fish are targeted. Indiscriminate fishing practices mean that one third of the entire world catch, amounting to a staggering 27 million tonnes, is dumped back into the ocean. It is just not fish that end up as bycatch, dolphins, seals and other marine mammals drown in nets along with turtles and seabirds. As many as 44,000 Albatrosses are killed in the southern oceans every year on longlines. Driftnets and abandoned "ghost" nets continue to trap all forms of marine life that are never harvested and simply rot away. Shrimp fishing produces more bycatch, in fact one third of the world total, than any other type of fishery. For every pound of wild shrimp caught, an average of five pounds of bycatch are thrown back into the water. In some cases, Trinidad for example, twenty pounds of bycatch are discarded for every pound of shrimp.

ILLEGAL FISHING PRACTICES

In general, legal controls are inadequate in fishing industry but illegal methods exacerbate the problem. With the reduction in fish stock and the cost of travelling further to fill their nets, some fishermen have resorted to destructive techniques that are becoming widespread and threaten to wipe out entire species and vast areas of coral reefs and coastlines.



Perhaps the most significant and damaging forms of illegal practices are explosive fishing and fish poisoning. Dynamite fishing (fish bombing) cause the fish to die instantly and they are then gathered up from the sea surface. This is an effective method of catching most of the available fish in the area and the devastation left behind is rarely given a second thought. Below the surface shattered corals and dead animals litter the sea floor. Once one section of the reef ceases to be productive, the fishermen take their bombs elsewhere and more destruction takes place.

Fish poisoning is even more destructive than blasting. Cyanide is released directly onto the coral reef where the fish are hiding in crevices. The cyanide immediately stuns the fish but they can usually be revived in clean water. To gain access, cyanide fishermen break off segments of live coral to pull the fish from it's hiding place to be placed in a holding tank aboard the fishing vessel. Although some of these fish are revived the cyanide remains on the coral reef killing vast sections and along with fish, crustaceans and other marine invertebrates, which die off at an alarming rate.

Cyanide fishing is becoming widespread in the Asia-Pacific region and the coral reefs are unlikely to recover unless this practice can be stamped out.

DESTRUCTIVE FISHING GEAR

It is not just illegal fishing gear, which is threatening the marine environment, growing evidence is showing that even legal methods can be damaging. In addition to the problem of bycatch, bottom trawls scour the seabed physically disturbing the upper layer and killing much of the sedentary life in their paths. Both reef-building corals and soft corals are destroyed this way and chances of re-colonisation are slim as persistent bottom trawling is allowed to continue in these rich, diverse areas.

THE HONG KONG SITUATION

There are few controls in Hong Kong to prevent over-fishing. The fishing fleet is efficient and the local harvest is in decline. Pollution, development, dredging and reclamation have also impacted local fisheries and those with ocean-going vessels are travelling further and further afield helping to increase the over-fishing problem throughout the region.

WHAT CAN BE DONE?

By reforming fisheries management we can begin to slow the over-fishing trend but we need public concern and interest to make this happen. WWF is already working with members of the seafood industry to create market-led incentives for sustainable fishing. The aim is to establish a Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which will be an independent body that will set standards for individual fisheries. Only fisheries meeting these standards will be eligible for certification



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and the consumer will then be able to choose those fish products that come from sustainable sources.

With millions of people depending on the world's fisheries for food and employment, we must act now to ensure that their future is assured.