

## **Too few fish in the sea**

How governments can prevent a complete wipeout of seafood species by curbing the number of fishing boats.

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WHEN IT COMES to the ocean, the crucible of life on our blue-marble planet, the best available science is projecting the worst imaginable scenario.

In 2003, fisheries scientists Ransom Myers and Boris Worm reported that 90% of the large predator fish, such as sharks and grouper, had disappeared from the world's oceans since 1950. Actually, they didn't disappear. We know where they went: onto our dinner plates as a result of industrial overfishing. Now a new, even broader study with Worm as lead author has appeared in the journal *Science*. This one projects that after millenniums of human dependence on wild fish as a source of protein and livelihood, commercial species of saltwater fish and shellfish could be wiped out on global scale by 2048 if present trends of overfishing continue.

The loss of complex oceanic biodiversity represented by marine wildlife would not only deny us a traditional source of food but contribute to the ongoing decline of our oceans and coasts, including the loss of unique habitats such as coral reefs, mangroves, salt marshes and kelp forests.

The greatest frustration with this latest disaster warning is that we know what the solutions are but have failed to generate the political will to act on them. In 2003 and 2004, two national commissions reported on the state of U.S. oceans. Their recommendations included ways to address the problem of overfishing. The most basic way is that we stop taking fish out of the ocean at a faster rate than they can reproduce.

Confronted with an array of scientifically questionable acronyms used by the global fishing industry, such as MSY (maximum sustainable yield), I've come up with one of my own that I believe could help resolve the crisis. I call it the BLUE plate special.

The B stands for "buybacks," a financial commitment by government and industry to reduce the size of the fishing fleet to a sustainable level. Currently, the global fleet is vastly overcapitalized. Buybacks would mean that governments from the European Union to Turkey, China and much of the rest of Asia would have to transition from subsidizing high-seas fishing fleets to recognizing the practical limits of resource exploitation. In the United States, we're still dealing with a surplus of fishing power (nets in the water) resulting from cheap government loans and tax

incentives going back to the Reagan administration and earlier.

The L is for "limited entry," which means only so many people can be licensed to work in a given fishery or biological complex of fisheries. A combination of market incentives such as transferable quotas (a cap-and-trade system for fish) and regulation can ensure that we don't have more people harvesting a living resource than its biology and habitat can sustain.

The U is for "undersea reserves." Since 1990, marine scientists have been saying that 20% of the oceans should be set aside as "no take" zones — protected marine wilderness areas where no fishing, dumping or drilling would take place, in order to restore and propagate marine wildlife and habitat. Although far less than 1% is now protected, where these areas do exist, studies are finding them highly effective engines of biodiversity, with healthy populations of fish, crustaceans and other creatures.

Finally, the E stands for "enforcement," a perennial problem when it comes to environmental law. As fish populations have declined, prices have increased. This creates a market-based incentive to take the last fish, even if that means turning pirate and ignoring the rules while going after high-dollar targets such as shark, lobster, abalone and bluefin tuna. We have to make a commitment to provide the resources to law enforcement services, such as the Coast Guard, to fund the needed fisheries patrols.

When it comes to homeland security, ensuring the world's food supply and ocean health are as important as securing our ports and waterways. We need national, bilateral and multilateral agreements to protect our common heritage, and we need to enforce those pacts.

We've gotten the warnings about the dangers to our living ocean; now we need to find the will to make sure it doesn't become a global dead sea.