
□ AMERICA'S STAKE IN THE CONSERVATION OF FISHERIES AND THE OCEANS

By Scott Burns, World Wildlife Fund

Managing the world's fisheries in a sustainable way would assure their productive capacity for the millions who work in them and the many more who depend on them for food, says Scott Burns of the World Wildlife Fund. What the oceans need now, he says, are stronger management of migratory fish stocks, reduction of fishing fleet overcapacity by eliminating subsidies, and strict protection for the most biologically important marine regions.

The fate of the earth's oceans is inextricably tied to U.S. economic and national security interests. The oceans provide a source of employment and income for millions worldwide. When sustainable management of marine resources is ignored, the long-term interests of coastal communities suffer and the economic engine upon which so many people depend is undermined. In major fisheries around the world, critically important resources are being depleted, and coastal economies threatened. Managing marine resources sustainably, however, will maximize economic return, strengthening local communities and our national economy.

ASSESSING THE THREATS

As we look abroad, as ocean resources are depleted, we have seen that competition between countries or sectors intensifies and can trigger confrontations, including violent ones. The recent incident at the maritime boundary between North and South Korea — triggered by a disagreement over access to fishing grounds — is a case in point and underlines the strong U.S. interest in peaceful resolution of maritime disputes around the world.

The well being of some of our country's most important allies will be determined in part by how successful they are in conserving ocean wildlife. The Philippines, for example, is located at the heart of the world's most biologically important coral region. Corals and the remarkable diversity of ocean life they support are an essential element in the Philippines economy.

Yet, these critical coral communities are disintegrating, part of a global collapse of coral ecosystems. Human activities threaten nearly 90 percent of Southeast Asia's coral reefs, jeopardizing their biological and economic values to the local people. Left unchecked, this coral crisis can only have a further destabilizing impact on coastal nations in the tropics, nations that are already in some cases politically and economically fragile.

ALARMING TRENDS

The trends in international fisheries are truly alarming. Notable cases include depletion of bluefin tuna populations worldwide, rampant — and often illegal — overfishing of Patagonian toothfish populations, and depletion of coastal fish populations in some of the poorest regions of the world by distant-water vessels from Europe and elsewhere.

In the United States, foreign fishing has a direct impact on some of our most important fish populations. The pollock, salmon, and other species caught in Alaska make up roughly half the U.S. fish catch. Yet many of these important fish populations are shared with Russia, and illegal fishing in the Russian waters of the Bering Sea poses a significant threat to the continued viability of these fisheries.

As consumers, as employers, as citizens, we all depend on oceans and their resources. The sea's bounty ranges from the ubiquitous fish fillet sandwich to limulus amebocyte lysate (LAL), a compound derived from the blood of horseshoe crabs used to test all injectible drug products and medical devices for the presence of endotoxin — a bacterium that can be fatal to humans.

If we use the sea wisely, the benefits it provides can increase over time. Unfortunately, the threats facing ocean wildlife and ecosystems have never been greater. Of the world's major fisheries, more than 70 percent are either overfished or fully exploited.

Addressing the problems of our oceans requires a shift in priorities: a redoubled effort to strengthen the

international management of migratory fish populations, new initiatives to create market signals that are consistent with ocean sustainability, and a global program to protect the most biologically important marine regions for future generations.

IMPROVING INTERNATIONAL FISHERIES MANAGEMENT

For every example of effective fisheries management there are too many cases of mismanagement, overfishing, and depletion. There is no single formula or solution to this problem. Wise fisheries management requires a combination of political will, prudent thinking, adherence to scientific advice, and a focus on what makes sense over the long term rather than what is merely expedient today.

Unfortunately, current international fisheries management regimes fall short of what's needed to address these concerns. Acquiescence to overfishing is the rule rather than the exception. In too many instances fishery managers have chosen to maximize short-term returns and put the long-term potential of the fisheries they manage at risk. Recently, the United States played a leadership role in shaping the new United Nations agreement that governs fishing for highly migratory and straddling fish stocks (the U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement). The agreement embodies important principles meant to assure the sustainability of fish stocks and the protection of marine life and mandates new measures to promote more effective and timely international cooperation and assure transparency in decision-making. But present regional fisheries conventions — and the organizations that implement them — are often directly at odds with the ideals of the U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement.

The International Convention for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), for example, has been a vehicle for mismanaging some of the Atlantic Ocean's most valuable fish populations. The North Atlantic Salmon Conservation Organization (NASCO) has regularly ignored scientific advice and presided over the demise of once-important commercial fisheries and the extinction of many historic salmon runs.

The U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement also explicitly calls on regional fisheries management organizations to do business in a transparent fashion. These bodies have done business behind closed doors for too long. A lack of

public scrutiny has encouraged shortsighted decision-making.

Exposing international fisheries governance to the light of day can only help assure accountability and better protect the fisheries resources.

The United States was one of the first major fishing nations to ratify the U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement. Now we have to put our money where our mouth is and take steps to assure that this principle is incorporated — and adhered to — in every international fishing body that we are party to.

What can be gained from more conservative management of fish populations? More jobs, higher catches, healthier oceans. The U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) has projected that fish catches could increase significantly in the future if overfishing is reined in now.

ADDRESSING THE IMPACT OF FISHING ON THE ENVIRONMENT

The U.N. Fish Stocks Agreement and other international instruments recognize the importance of reducing fishing's harmful effects on ocean species and ecosystems. Fishing's unintended consequences include an estimated 20 million tons of bycatch a year and in some cases the destruction of habitats that serve as cornerstones of marine productivity and biological diversity. For example, bycatch is by far the most important threat to populations of dolphins and other cetaceans.

Reducing bycatch and mitigating fishing's other impacts on the environment makes business sense as well. In many cases bycatch consists of commercially valuable fish species, caught before they have reached marketable size. In the Gulf of Mexico, for example, bycatch in shrimp fisheries has played a major role in undermining red snapper populations.

Fortunately, there are plenty of good examples of fishermen and managers working together to solve bycatch problems. In the eastern Pacific tuna fishery, the bycatch of dolphins dropped by more than 98 percent through a concerted effort by fishermen and regional governments. If we set priorities for fisheries where bycatch poses a major problem and work aggressively to solve it, we can achieve similar results elsewhere.

This will only happen in international fisheries if relevant conventions are modified to explicitly mandate bycatch reduction and habitat protection — and if there is the political will to assure that these new mandates are actually carried out.

CREATING A HOSPITABLE ECONOMIC ENVIRONMENT FOR OCEAN CONSERVATION

Conservation policies are most likely to be embraced if they are in synch with the economic signals that shape commercial behavior.

Today, though, economic incentives are more often than not inconsistent with the stated objectives of current ocean policy. This lack of harmony is most pronounced in the fisheries sector, where economic incentives encourage the expansion of fishing fleets that are already too large and stimulate a race for fish that is neither biologically sound nor economically prudent.

The United States should play a stronger role in encouraging the development of measures to address the problem of fishing fleet overcapacity. Overcapacity is a root cause of the collapse of New England's cod population and is at the heart of the crises in the Pacific rockfish and Alaska crab fisheries. It also poses a major threat to the health of international fisheries that are of critical importance to U.S. fishermen and markets.

Overcapacity, spurred by massive government supports on the scale of \$15 billion to \$20 billion annually, also is linked to poverty and underdevelopment where subsidized fleets from developed countries compete with fledgling local industries. The subsidies have helped underwrite cycles of mismanagement that have ultimately left thousands of fishermen in developing countries unemployed.

Where overcapacity exists, fishermen must fish harder and spend more to catch fewer fish but earn less. Overcapacity also increases habitat destruction and the bycatch of marine life. While reducing the size of fleets is perhaps the single most important step that can be taken to improve the long-term viability of fisheries and protect biological diversity and the economic interests of fishermen, international efforts to better manage fleet size have made little progress. The FAO Plan of Action for managing fishing capacity is largely a paper exercise. In those few cases where steps are being taken to control fleet growth, they are "too little, too late."

In the Inter-American Tropical Tunas Commission, for example, present capacity-control measures are plainly inadequate despite clear evidence that overcapacity is already threatening tuna populations and eroding economic returns. In other important international fisheries no concrete measures at all have been established to address the problem of burgeoning fleets. The continued failure to address this issue will inevitably result in additional depletions, lower profits and exacerbated tensions between competing fishing groups and countries.

In 1997, WWF began an international campaign to eliminate government subsidies that drive overfishing. A critical goal of that campaign has been to achieve binding and effective new rules under the World Trade Organization (WTO) to discipline fishing subsidies. Last November, in an important step, trade ministers meeting in Doha, Qatar, agreed to include negotiations on fishing subsidies in the new round of WTO negotiations.

CONSERVING THE MOST BIOLOGICALLY IMPORTANT MARINE AREAS

In addressing the threats to the integrity of our oceans, it makes sense to begin with the most pressing problems and focus first on the habitats that are most critical to life in the sea and the marine areas that house the greatest biological wealth. At the global scale, WWF has worked with leading scientists around the world to identify a set of ecosystems that are most important to life on earth. In the marine realm, these biological priorities include the Bering Sea (home to America's richest fisheries); the Sulu-Sulawesi seas at the center of the oceans' most biologically diverse region, and the Galapagos archipelago, a unique and highly productive marine system. Such places of special biological importance should be considered as the United States develops its ocean conservation priorities.

Within these biologically important regions, the United States should play a leadership role in promoting the creation of networks of protected areas to conserve the oceans' web of life. Marine protected areas are well established as the most effective tool for safeguarding marine biological diversity. The problem is that existing protected areas are too few, too dispersed, and, frankly, too small to provide large-scale conservation benefits. At present less than 1 percent of the world's oceans and coasts are under any form of effective management or protection.

Recent scientific studies from Florida and the Caribbean demonstrate that protected areas can play an important role in the rebound of fisheries. Linked together in networks, they can serve as the centerpiece for initiatives to conserve large-scale seascapes — like the one the United States has started in the Florida Keys. In the Dry Tortugas, for example, WWF worked with fishermen and other stakeholders to create the largest fully protected marine reserve in the United States. Our experience there

and our review of the latest science convinces us that well-designed protected areas can help secure the long-term objectives of all parties. □

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