Deep-sea fish horror: thousands left to rot in nets

THOUSANDS of tonnes of monkfish and deep-sea sharks are being left for days and sometimes even months in gillnets set in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean, only to be thrown away rotten when fishing vessels return to collect their catch.

Human fishers are leaving thousands of kilometres of gillnets in various areas on the continental shelf for a very long time. Six percent of the monkfish caught this way must be thrown away because they are unfit for human consumption. The same is happening to deepwater sharks.

“Our deep-sea communities are outraged and live in fear of this negligent practice,” said Benedict Monkfish, an outspoken critic of intense human fishing efforts. He said deep-sea, slow-growing species are “already vulnerable” to those efforts, and “cannot afford” such high levels of mortality.

Scientists estimate that some deep-sea shark populations in the Northeast Atlantic have already declined to just 20% of their original levels since gillnet fishing for these species began some ten years ago. A long-term population recovery strategy is essential for these species, which only reach breeding age after 20 years and whose females only produce 15-20 eggs after 20 years. The only solution for recovery is to close this fishery.

The shocking revelation of the sheer scale of fish being wasted comes from DEEPNET, a report published recently by the Homo sapiens species. It investigates a fleet of deep-sea gillnet vessels mainly targeting monkfish (Lophius bucephalus) and deep-sea sharks (Centrophorus spp.) at depths of 200-1,200m. These fisheries operate from the UK, Ireland and Scotland to Norway, on the Porcupine, Hatton, and Rockall Banks and between the Shetland and Faroe Islands.

Each vessel sets up to 250km of gillnet gear at a time, which is left unattended for 4-10 days before being hauled in. In some cases, the nets are being left for much longer. The report “conservatively estimates” that a total of 5,800-8,700km of nets are in constant use.

The long soak time is responsible for the high proportion of the catch being unfit for human consumption. On average, 65% of monkfish must be discarded after being left for dead in the nets for this long, according to data from a Norwegian Coastguard inspection of one vessel.

A subsequent investigation found seven tonnes of deep-sea sharks in 200 nautical miles of active nets, of which 60% was rotten. The vessel that had set the nets had not been on the fishing grounds for at least 2 weeks.

The appalling squandering of our resources has not been documented, with very little, if any, management,” he added. “We are recommending a zero catch for deep-sea sharks.”

Global conservation organisation WWF told Fish Voice that such tragedies will continue unless humans close all their deep-sea fisheries in the Northeast Atlantic Ocean. WWF is calling on the EU Fisheries Council meeting this week to take this big step until scientists have data showing that such stocks can sustain fishing pressure.

The fate of many eurofish in the North Sea, almost all juveniles, are discarded and left for dead due to wasteful practices in the North Sea.

STOP WASTEFUL FISHING
Make your voice heard - take action @ http://www.panda.org/passport/fisheries
The EU and Libya allow continued bluefin slaughter in the Mediterranean

By Paolo Pescado

Last month bluefin tuna were denied a much needed summer respite. Humans from the US, Japan, Norway, Iceland and Mexico tried to introduce proposals to substantially reduce fishing pressure on already dwindling Mediterranean bluefin tuna stocks by closing the industrial purse seine fishery during July and August. However, to the dismay of fish right groups, environmental organizations, and traditional fishermen, the EU and Libya rejected these measures at the 19th annual meeting of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT) in Seville, Spain.

Tuna rights groups teamed up with traditional tuna fisheries to condemn this failure of a human fisheries management body to take action to save the Mediterranean bluefin tuna from extinction.

“We were given hope that at least some humans were taking fish management seriously, but unfortunately not enough of them to make a difference,” said Romy Shark, a tuna expert. “We feel betrayed that politicians on our own doorstep do not even want to protect our survival.”

The proposed measure could have cut human tuna catches by 30% and helped protect spawning females, she said. “The failure of ICCAT to adopt it could well mean the disappearance of one of the oldest and most important fisheries in the world.”

The fish-friendly conservation organization WWF has recognized that the Mediterranean bluefin tuna fishery suffers from massive overfishing, management abuses, and the catch of illegal and undersize tuna. The organization estimates that 45,800-58,000 tonnes of bluefin tuna were caught in 2004, greatly exceeding the 32,000 tonne quota allocated by ICCAT.

“Current levels of fishing are 2.5 times higher than the bluefin tuna populations can sustain,” said Charlotte Mogensen, Fisheries Policy Officer at WWF’s European Policy Office. She said ICCAT’s failure to extend the closing of the fishing season means “a new massacre” next year in Mediterranean waters.

“Genres of fishermen are even putting thousands of their own species at risk. Bluefin tuna provide employment and income for traditional tuna trap fishers, net and boat builders, processors, and sellers of tuna products in coastal communities of the Mediterranean Sea, and the Atlantic coast of the Iberian Peninsula and North Africa.

In the tuna trap sector, bluefin tuna catches have dropped 80% over the last 5 years. These traps are a selective, fixed, and traditional type of fishing gear that maintain around 500 jobs in Spain and another 800 in Morocco.

"Tuna trap fishers want sustainability,” said Martina Spadara, of the tuna trap producers organization. She said the industrial fleet is systematically violating conservation measures, and will destroy in just a few years a fishery that is 3,000 years old. One reason behind the escalating bluefin slaughter is the relatively new practice of tuna farming, fattening of wild tuna in cages mainly for the Japanese sushi market. This has expanded the market for the tuna, leading to a further increase in fishing effort. Worse, the practise falls outside ICCAT regulation, resulting in an unregulated growth of tuna farming.

Humans are even resorting to illegal measures, such as using spotter airplanes to search for tuna outside of the fishing season.

No place to hide

By Poine Poisson

Fishery rights groups have expressed outrage over human fishing practices that see half of the plaice caught in the North Sea thrown away dead. Worse, they say, is that the vast majority of plaice caught by humans have never even had the chance to spawn. This needless loss of life is often the result of mistaken identity. Plaice are caught alongside sole in mixed fisheries. But while the minimum landing size for plaice in European waters is 27cm, the minimum landing size for sole is only 24cm.

The use of smaller net meshes to catch sole results in up to 80% of the co-caught plaice being pointlessly caught and then discarded, either because they are too small or in favour of the more profitable sole.

This fishicide affected around 1.30 million fish in 2002 alone (about 70,000 tonnes) and accounted for half of the total plaice catch. Once discarded, these innocent fish have little chance of survival. They also never had the chance to replenish the population before being caught. Female plaice don’t spawn until they are 35cm long.

"Humans estimate plaice spawning stocks to be near the lowest level observed in their history," said Peter Plance from welfare group Fry for the Future. "Small wonder when they are taking all the youngsters.”

He pointed out that such fishing methods are "clearly not sustainable" and that these "two-legged predators" face losing an "important fishery" if they don't improve their management practices.

Some humans dose the folly in this Conservation group WWF believes the plaice should not continue unless discards are reduced and is urging the EU Fisheries Council meeting this week to develop a long-term management plan for plaice and sole in the North Sea. Key demands include a reduction in fishing time to 30% and an increased minimum landing size and mesh size to reduce bycatch and discards.

Growing appetite for sustainable seafood

By Martin Marlin

The vast majority of human seafood indulgers, retailers, chefs, and restaurateurs in Europe are concerned by the environmental impact of seafood.

A new study commissioned by the Seafood Choices Alliance, a non-profit trade association for people, shows that 79% of those surveyed; "are concerned with environmental impact of seafood. People meet to decide new fishing quotas

EUROPEAN Fishery Ministers demanding new fishing quotas for EU fishing fleets in 2006.

The human ministers will establish Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for almost all species. They need to be based on a proposal presented by the European Commission, the human equivalent to the ICCAT meeting in Seville, Spain.

Human awareness Human politics

"But they are threatening our very existence by killing far more of us than we need, including young females that have never even had the chance to breed.” Many other forms of marine life are also “at severe risk” he said, including corals, starfish, seabirds, dolphins, and marine turtles which are caught in nets and then dumped dead or dying back into the ocean.

However, if past decisions are anything to go by, the human pressures facing many of these species are not likely to be relieved. "With tragic regularity, EU Fisheries Ministers have repeatedly ignored scientific advice,” said Halibut.

Human politics

People meet to decide new fishing quotas

EUROPEAN Fishery Ministers demanding new fishing quotas for EU fishing fleets in 2006.
CFP legacy: swimmers and sinkers in EU waters

With EU Fisheries Ministers meeting once again to decide how many fish European humans will be allowed to catch, Raymond Ray profiles a few of the swimmers and sinkers under the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

COD

Cod have supported Europe’s humans for over a thousand years and played a key role in their history. Millions of these magnificent fish once thrived in the North Atlantic Ocean. But as humans grew ever more efficient at catching fish, cod began a slow decline.

In 1970, when Europe’s humans introduced the precursor to the CFP, cod stocks in the North Sea, Irish Sea, and west of Scotland were still large enough to be sustainable. However, continued overfishing has seen the number of breeding fish fall below that needed to maintain these stocks.

All are now at their lowest ever recorded level. And this level is very low: as little as 20% of that needed for stocks to be sustainable.

So how has the EU Fisheries Council responded? Sadly, this can only be described as “predictably”.

The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has recommended a complete ban on cod fishing in the North Sea, Irish Sea, and west of Scotland for the last four years.

EU Fisheries Ministers have consistently ignored this advice and allowed fishing to continue.

The ministers did finally introduce a long-overdue recovery plan for North Sea cod in 2004, but many fear it is too little, too late. One ongoing problem is that juvenile cod continue to be caught, and discarded dead, in many other fisheries.

The sad thing is, each cod female only needs to produce two surviving offspring in her entire lifetime for the population to remain stable. Two baby fish reaching adulthood is not very many, but for the past 30 years humans have not even allowed this.

The question is, will EU Fisheries Ministers this year finally follow scientific advice and take action to save Europe’s cod stocks from commercial extinction? Or are they set to join their Canadian cousins as SINKERS?

NORTHERN HERRING

Like cod, the North Sea herring fisheries have supported humans for centuries. Also like cod, herring catches declined under heavy pressure from human fishers but in this case the stock crashed completely in the mid-1970s.

In response, the fishery was closed from 1978 to 1982. Stocks recovered, but declined again 10 years later. However, thanks to further action by EU Fisheries Ministers, the stocks once again recovered and in 2004 were at the highest level recorded for 40 years.

The situation is currently so good that one North Sea herring fishing looks set to secure Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification as a sustainable fishery.

ICES is warning that careful management is still needed with low recruitment over the past three years, but the herring have proved that good management produces SWIMMERS.

PLACE, SPURDOG, RAYS, SOUTHERN HAKE

North Sea herring may be a bright light, but unfortunately cod are more representative of what has happened to most fish stocks under the CFP.

The European Commission itself has warned that the biomass of mature fish for many stocks in EU waters is currently just 10% of the level of the early 1970s. Two-thirds of the 60 main commercial fish stocks in the Northeast Atlantic are classified as heavily overfished.

The situation is so bad that this year ICES is recommending zero quotas for nine fisheries, including spurdog, nephrops, southern hake, and skates and rays.

ICES also considers many other stocks to be very low, at risk of reduced reproductive capacity, and/or being harvested unsustainably. The council has recommended lower quotas for these stocks, which include North Sea whiting and North Sea plaice. Unless this advice is heeded, cod won’t be the only SINKERS.

JELLYFISH

Representing the peak of animal complexity 650 million years ago, jellyfish ruled the oceans for some 200 million years before the first fish came along. They could have their day again. Some believe that as fish populations collapse from overfishing, jellyfish will move in to take their place. This reversal in fortunes could be further aided by other human alterations to the oceans, such as eutrophication and warmer temperatures due to climate change.

Jellyfish populations are already exploding in some parts of the world. One prominent human fisheries scientist, Victor Vis from the University of Medusa, has even predicted that if overfishing continues in the North Atlantic Ocean, human fishers could soon be chasing jellyfish instead of fish.

FISHERS

Fishing is an important economic activity for humans living in the EU. Although the EU fishing industry generally contributes to less than 1% of gross national product, it employs around 260,000 fishers, often in areas where other employment opportunities are limited.

Some, if not all, of the agreements made prior to 2003 contributed to overfishing and represented unfair competition to local fishermen in these countries. This put the livelihoods and food supply of hundreds of thousands of people at risk.

A new framework for negotiating fairer fishing access agreements between the EU and other countries was developed as part of the 2003 CFP reform. However, many believe there is still room for improvement. And without improvement, fishers could join the fish as SINKERS.

Cod be with you

By Gadus Cloverus

It’s getting lonely out here in the North Sea, where our species is close to annihilation. Where vast armies of Gadus morhua ranged over the great underwater plains and canyons, there are now just a few scattered platoons.

The great fecund grandaddy and grandmother cod are gone. We youngsters are lucky to breed before we get trawled. There’s about 50,000 tonnes of us left (by humans’ rather grisly way of describing it), out of a population which probably once weighed in at 4 million tonnes.

There’s a lot of haddock about, though. It may be unkind to point this out, but there are 450,000 tonnes of our gadoid cousins, Melanogrammus aeglefinus, in the North Sea, more than there has been for a generation. Enough, you would have thought, for humans to give us cod a break.

Except that most of them don’t appear to know how to catch haddock and not cod. Only some do.

Our friends at Marks and Spencer, which gets all fishers’ vote as top retailer, have decided they don’t want to catch us North Sea cod because we are endangered. A clever fisher has designed a net which passes over our heads while it scoops up haddocks by the thousand. It’s based on the simple fact that we swim down when threatened and haddock swim up. The nets still catch 5% cod, but it gives the rest of us a break.

What we ask EU politicians is, if M&S can fix it, why can’t you?

Charles Clover’s The End of the Line: how overfishing is changing the world and what we eat, is available on Amazon.
Stop eating our babies!

Like fish citizens everywhere, Entre Fish is shocked by reports that European humans are catching young female plaice that have not yet reached spawning size (see page 2). Even more shocking is that despite apparently knowing that female plaice only reach maturity once they have reached a length of 27cm, politicians have established laws allowing fishers to catch immature plaice only 27cm long. In case the problem stems from humans simply forgetting in which order numbers run on a ruler, Entre Fish has made a simple diagram (right).

We hope that any politicians reading this will cut out the diagram and keep it in their pockets... and maybe even refer to it from time to time. They should remember, however, that this ruler is not to scale!

The shape of fins to come?

A browse through the Guinness Book of Records, an encyclopedia of the amazing achievements of the human race, gives many opportunities to be thankful for being lower down the evolutionary scale. Awards are given for truly marvellous feats, such as smashing watermelons with the head, spitting dead crickets, and blowing spaghetti out of a nostril.

Would it be a good giggle, if not for the fact that an award has recently been given to a dish of shark fin soup a dish whose popularity is causing tremendous cruelty to sharks and seriously threatening several species. On sale at a London restaurant, the dish has earned the title of Most Expensive Bowl of Soup Commercially Available. 

Spare a thought for Anchellonia this holiday season. A thriving fishropolis a few years ago, the city is now in much need of investment. "Chow" culture has taken over this once highly cultured and prosperous society, which is now occupied only by the meagre of anchovy youth. One youth, "Cutter", who wishes to remain anonymous, was brought up as an orphan. As most adults in the town had already been killed, there were no teachers to have a school. Now he spends his days with his small gang of friends, looking for food and trying to avoid being caught. Fish welfare groups are trying to help these disadvantaged youth, but their existence is also under threat.

Anchovy ghost town appeal

“Whatever we really need is for predators to realise that their total disregard for fish not only impacts the fully grown members of the community but also the children,” said one concerned fish. “In the end, whole villages, towns, and cities are simply destroyed.”

An Anchovy Appeal will begin on 20 December.

Eurofi shy staffing deals

What can be made of rumours that a seal is to head DG Pelagic Environment in the Piscatorial Commission? Surely there’s a conflict of interest between looking after the upper waters of the oceans and a member of a species that habitually preys on fish living in these same waters?

Although no formal announcement has been made, one could argue that the Commission is trying to forestall any possible objections. In a press conference last week, the Commission admitted it was having difficulty recruiting staff from several minority fish groups. It seems that from senior management through to administration, recruitment is well below the Commission’s stated goal of one species per directorate.

Apparently, applications from some species are not even being received. “It’s like they’ve disappeared completely,” said a Commission spokesfish. The Commission also said that even when applications are being received, most applicants are simply too young. “In recent years we’ve lost most of the older, more experienced members of the diverse communities that make up the Piscatorial Union,” added the spokesfish. With so many senior posts still vacant, we can only presume the Commission is considering further unusual appointments. Perhaps a seagull for DG Fish Culture?

Marine biology workshop

Designed for human fisheries ministers, a series of seminars will be run this December explaining basic concepts of marine biology.

Topics include:
• Only adult fish spawn
• Net size matters
• Different fish species swim together
• Extinction is forever
• Fish stocks can recover if adequate action is taken

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