

# Save the fish: food for thought?

While climate change has conquered global headlines for the past decade, the sorry state of the world's fish stocks has barely penetrated the public consciousness. The tide, however, is about to turn: "Imagine a World without Fish," suggests a new movie. "Aquacalypse!" cries a biologist. As stakeholders in Europe get set for a massive overhaul of the fisheries sector, the Quarterly looks at the need for reform and explores what insights can be shared with marine resource managers in the Red Sea region.

BY VERENA RINGLER

"The End of the Line – Imagine a World without Fish," is the title of a new documentary movie about the devastating effects of overfishing and its direct connection to the tuna roll on our dinner table. The movie chronicles man emptying the ocean like there is no tomorrow. It asserts "peak fish" happened in 1989. What has followed since has resulted in plunging numbers of fish and a hike in costs. Director Rupert Murray recounts: "Many places have seen fish populations crash. We tried to tell one story, about one problem, affecting one global ocean. We found it was, tragically, the same for everyone."

Murray and script writer Charles Clover are not the only whistleblowers about global overfishing.

Fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly joined the chorus with his 2009 tale *Aquacalypse Now* in *The New Republic* magazine, stating: "It is not just the future of the fishing industry that is at stake, but also the continued health of the world's largest ecosystem." A 2006 forecast by 14 academics in the journal *Science* predicted that by 2048, commercial fish stocks would be generating 10 percent or less of their peak catches. Ransom Myers and Boris Worm, authors of a 2003 article in

the magazine *Nature*, suggested that our oceans had already lost more than 90 percent of their predatory fish stocks – cod, tuna and salmon, for example.

Given that fish move across national borders and that the actions of one fishing fleet affect the opportunities of others, fish should have been attracting global, holistic attention since fleets were first industrialized in the 1950s. However, fish have received mostly national and industry attention. As a result, a global crisis has long been unfolding, as governments and fisheries quibble over quotas, increase subsidies, and invest in GPS ►

\*A peak in the biomass, or weight, of fish caught from the world's oceans.



PHOTO: MAREMA CENTRE, NORWEGIAN COLLEGE OF FISHERY SCIENCE, UNIVERSITY OF TROMSØ

*Without a more responsible approach to fishing, abundant displays of seafood, like this one at a market in Norway, may soon be a thing of the past.*

◀ and onboard computerized trackers. There is no global regime for controlling what may be fished where, when and how.

In the 1990s, scientific studies first demonstrated the global fish depletion. Governments watched in awe when Canada closed the Grand Banks in 1992. By then, two structural rifts in the sector had already deepened: first, marine biologists would tend to focus on the oceanic ecosystem and exchanged little information with fisheries biologists, who in turn were more concerned about the ocean's profits and often worked for governments or the industry. Second, the public had not been properly alerted to the threat facing their tuna roll or fish and chips. Exploitation of fish stocks has continued, although many other items on our menus have seen a move to eco-friendly, fair-trade products.

The United States was the first to see its fish crisis unfold. Now, this struggle is on in the European Union which aims to

reform its common fisheries policy in 2012. Here, there is not only an environmental problem due to overfishing, but the industry is also expensive and inefficient. In a number of EU member states, taxpayers pay more to support their fisheries than they get back in terms of product value. The EU, with the world's third-largest fleet, still has to import 70 percent of the continent's fish and aquaculture needs.

The EU regime is the Common Fisheries Policy from 1983, which has seen scathing assessments from the EU Court of Auditors and the British House of Lords. Even the European Commission (EC) – the very body proposing and executing EU legislation – rang the alarm bells in a Green Paper in April 2009. "Overfished stocks and poor economic performance in the fishing industry has created a momentum for further deterioration, a vicious circle...(This) leads to even stronger pressures from the industry

to let short-term concerns compromise the long-term sustainability of fisheries even further. It has proven difficult for governments to resist this pressure,” reads the EC’s Green Paper. Facing overfished stocks of 80 percent in the EU, the EC concludes that “industry incentives need to be turned around...to a situation where fishermen would be made responsible and accountable for the sustainable use of a public resource.”

Over the past months, European stakeholders have started waking from their slumber. Not only have Greenpeace and the WWF been calling for reforms. Also, and more remarkably, a new choir of voices has emerged. Ocean 2012, an alliance formed in 2009, mobilizes and coordinates a large cohort of stakeholders, among them organizations representing environmental, development and consumer interests as well as divers, aquariums and scientists. Ocean 2012 was initiated by the Pew Environment Group in Brussels, which considered a move to broader consultations to be long overdue. “Fisheries reforms suffer from a vested interest problem. So we expanded the voices of interest,” says Markus Knigge, Policy and Research Director of Pew’s European Marine Program.

Without much tinkering, Ocean 2012 plugs itself right into the EU fisheries reform process, summarizing stakeholder demands on four points: First, catch limits should be set by scientists and not by politicians. Second, fishing capacity must be brought in line with available fishing resources. Third, access to fish resources should be based on environmental and social criteria. And fourth, subsidies and other financial instruments awarded in a discretionary manner by EU member states should target facilitating the transition towards environmentally and socially sustainable fisheries. In other words – a principle-centered approach to fishing.

While Ocean 2012 faces three hard-working years ahead, this new alliance already provides a first collection of best practice and lobbying lessons from regional, sustainable fisheries management.

What would Ocean 2012 members share with the seven Red Sea sharing countries who have joined up for a Marine Resources Management Program (see box)? Just three years ago, analysts looking at that region concluded dryly: “If fisheries management means the cyclical and iter-

ative process enunciated in the code of conduct for responsible fishing, then fisheries management does not exist to any significant extent in countries of the Red Sea basin.” Increasing coastal populations, rapid development and human exploitation threaten the sustainability ▶

## Marine resources management in the Red Sea



For the past three years, an important fisheries management project has been underway in the Red Sea, a unique waterway shared by seven countries – Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia and Yemen. Led jointly by the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) and the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), with co-financing from OFID and the Arab Fund for Economic and Social development, this multi-partner initiative has two main aims – firstly, to promote the sustainable management of the Sea’s resources; and secondly, to protect the interests of some 850,000 people in the region who are dependent on the artisanal fisheries sector.

The hub of the project is a regional forum – involving all countries and stakeholders – which is working to enhance national institutional capacities to support the development of a common policy framework. Underpinning the framework is a comprehensive database on actual and potential Red Sea resources to guide how all stakeholders operate in future.

According to IFAD, one of the greatest challenges of the project has been to balance the interests of the industrial fisheries with those of the artisanal fisher folk. This has meant organizing and empowering the latter to better articulate their needs, and harnessing their expert knowledge of the local situation for the benefit of all concerned.

## Further Reading

The books, “Cod”, by Mark Kurlansky (1998), “The Unnatural History of the Sea” by Callum Roberts (2008), and “The End of the Line: How Overfishing is Changing the World and What We Eat” by Charles Clover (2008; DVD 2010) introduce lovers of tuna roll and cod to the consequences of our eating habits.

The EU policy is with the European Commission’s Directorate-General for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, [www.ec.europa.eu](http://www.ec.europa.eu). The coalition for transforming European fisheries is Ocean 2012, [www.ocean2012.eu](http://www.ocean2012.eu). The site [www.fishsubsidy.org](http://www.fishsubsidy.org) details subsidy flows to countries and vessels. Globally, stakeholders might consult the Marine Stewardship Council [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org). Fishworkers and their organizations, especially artisanal and small-scale fisheries in developing countries, can download the guide, Understanding the Work in Fishing Convention 2007, in many languages, including Arabic, at [www.icsf.net](http://www.icsf.net).

◀ and special conservation value of the sea. Yet, marine resources there are among the globe’s most precious, and the joint management of fisheries in the region is vital for people, sea and fish alike. Artisanal fisheries alone are estimated to support one million jobs in the seven Red Sea sharing countries Djibouti, Egypt, Eritrea, Jordan, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen.

Sure enough, looking at Europe versus the Red Sea, “you need to take the special oceanographic conditions of the Red Sea into account. This is a tropical zone, with particular cultural traditions and geopolitics,” cautions Brian O’Riordan from the ICSF, an Ocean 2012 member and fishworkers’ collective that contributed to the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries.

Yet some insights are generally applicable, suggests Knigge of the Pew Environment Group. His magic word for regional management is “accountability.” He says: “If you set rules for people, you better get them to the table. You want to establish clear objectives, against which practitioners are then measured.” Similar

advice comes from Magnus Eckeskog, a policy officer with the Fisheries Secretariat in Sweden, another Ocean 2012 member. Eckeskog suggests fisheries managers should “include a wide range of interest groups. The public should have at least as much – or perhaps even more – say than the industry, when discussing the use of a public resource.”

Eckeskog’s magic word for successful fisheries management is “long-termism.” He dreams of an end to discussions on annual quotas and outtake, and a move to long term-management based on the precautionary and ecosystem approach. Also, he suggests reversing the burden of proof so that government bodies draw up the general rules, while the fishermen make an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA), showing that their fishery is not harmful to the environment and conducted in a responsible manner. Based on the EIA, they would receive or buy their fishing rights. Hence, the responsibility would be with the fishermen, just like it is with factories or sewage plants in pollution issues. Eckeskog: “Perhaps that is the way to go in the Red Sea.”

Biologist and *Aquacalypse* author Daniel Pauly also suggests a new – albeit controversial – approach to fishing rights. He says fishermen should do it like ranchers, who, in many countries, pay for the privilege to graze their cattle on federal lands. If governments auctioned off quotas with access privileges to fisheries, the highest bidder would secure the right to a certain percentage of the catch quota. Society as a whole would benefit from providing private access to a public resource.

While environmental economists race over their calculators and graphs to trigger a sea change in regional management bodies, consumers have their own tool to save the fish literally on their plate. “Everyone can demand sustainable seafood,” proposes Rupert Murray, director of *The End of the Line*. He says, “If you consider how simple and universally agreed the solutions are ... Healthy oceans are a win, win, win situation.”

If the alert signals start travelling, turning the tide seems possible. At a reception in July 2009 for instance, Prince Charles Mountbatten-Windsor publicly demanded more awareness-raising among consumers. The crowd the Prince addressed were fishing industry leaders and caterers, and the occasion was the 10-year anniversary of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The MSC promotes sustainable fishing via the certification of products. The dark-blue MSC label on a frozen fish carton means the MSC can trace the product back to the fishery and often the very boat that caught the fish. Two months after Prince Charles’s address to the MSC, the restaurant group *Fifteen*, backed by British celebrity-chef Jamie Oliver, said these restaurants would now commit to using MSC-labeled fish on their menu. Consumers might start thinking: what is good for Jamie Oliver, might certainly be good for me and my children. ■