

GREENPEACE

**Dragging the life
out of the deep-sea:**

**Why a global moratorium
on high seas bottom trawl fishing
is essential to protect deep-sea life**

Dragging the life out of the deep-sea

Why a global moratorium on high seas bottom trawl fishing is essential to protect deep-sea life

Bottom trawling is a hugely destructive fishing method that wreaks havoc on the ocean floor, catches much more than the fish being targeted¹ and often occurs in areas where there is little understanding of the species being caught or the deep-sea ecosystems in which they live.

Research done in 2004 shows that highly diverse deep-sea cold water corals are widespread along the edge of the continental shelf and close to the submarine canyons of Newfoundland and Labrador's waters. These corals and sponge ecosystems act like tropical coral reefs, providing hideaways for marine invertebrates and forming deep-sea biodiversity hotspots. They are also home to several commercial fish: redfish, Atlantic cod, Greenland halibut and shrimp. Most of the corals hauled up from the deep as by-catch are found in otter trawls or bottom trawls. The research concluded that if these corals are to be conserved, restricting deep water trawling is essential².

An estimated 60% of the world's high seas bottom trawling occurs in the Northwest Atlantic and most of this in the NAFO Regulatory Area³. It is concentrated on the Nose and Tail of the Grand Banks and on the Flemish Cap. Northern prawns, Greenland halibut, redfish and skates are the major fish species that bottom trawlers target, but significant amounts of grenadiers (roughhead and roundnose), hake, cod and flatfishes, are caught as by-catch.

NAFO has been responsible for the protection and sustainable management of fisheries in this area for more than 25 years, and is supposed to be one of the most well established and developed Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs) in the world. Yet it is plagued by misreporting, opaque decision-making, and decimated fish stocks. The so-called 'legal' fishers or members of NAFO appear to be regular lawbreakers and have been issued with more than 300 citations for NAFO infringements in the last decade and so today, of the six straddling groundfish stocks managed by NAFO, four are under moratoria as a result of overfishing.

In 2003, the UN General Assembly called on regional bodies like NAFO to adopt specific rules to protect corals and other deep-water species and habitats from the destructive impact of bottom trawling. Yet sponge and coral populations found within the NAFO Regulatory Area remain unprotected from deep-sea bottom trawling, even though next to nothing is known about them. It is thus clear that based on current and past management experience, NAFO cannot adequately manage the high seas bottom trawl fisheries in the Regulatory Area, or its effects on marine ecosystems.

Canada is a Contracting Party to NAFO, the major coastal state next to the NAFO Regulatory Area and the major fishing nation in the Northwest Atlantic. At a June 2005 meeting at the United Nations in New York, Canada opposed a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling, and argued that such a move would disadvantage 'legal' fishers and that fisheries organisations like NAFO are best placed to deal with this issue. But Canada itself has done a poor job of ensuring that the fisheries it is supposed to manage remain productive and sustainable. The collapse of the northern cod fishery in Canadian waters adjacent to the NAFO Regulatory Area is a case in point. Damage done by high seas bottom trawlers

occurs both inside and outside the 200 nautical mile limit. Inside its own EEZ, Canada has closed a few small-scale fisheries and established some limited marine protected areas, but has not taken a progressive approach to gear assessment or gear restrictions based on habitat destruction.

Canada argues that no fishing gear type is inherently destructive and does not support outlawing any fisheries practice or gear type unless and until appropriate scientific verification supports this and it is internationally recognised. Yet from the fishing industry to academia, there is consensus that bottom trawling is the most destructive of all fishing methods. A comprehensive study in 2003, *Shifting Gears*, examined the relative impacts of 10 different commercial fishing gears on marine ecosystems.⁴ The results showed unanimous agreement amongst the academic and industry groups surveyed that bottom trawling did the most damage to the seabed. Over 1000 marine scientists from around the world called for a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling at the American Association for the Advancement of Science meeting in February 2004. Internationally recognised scientific verification that bottom trawling is destructive is undisputed – except perhaps to the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans.

Sustainable fishing methods ensure a sustainable fishery. For many species, sustainable or at least less destructive methods of fishing exist. The continued, unrestricted use of bottom trawl fishing gear will ensure that jobs in the fishery continue to be lost, and remain so in the long term and that the marine ecosystem will take much longer to recover from overharvesting – if ever. This is clearly illustrated by the failure of northern cod stocks to return. The excuse that environmental conservation must come at the expense of jobs is false and is simply used as an excuse to avoid doing the right thing.

All countries fishing in this area, in the past, present and future are responsible for the state of the marine environment. They have signed international agreements to collectively manage and conserve the marine ecosystem, which includes all marine species – not just commercially harvested fish. Instead of thinking in the long-term interest of this rich marine ecosystem, they have worked for the self-interest of their industrial fishing fleets. It is time for that to stop.

There are currently no rules in place that protect especially vulnerable deep sea ecosystems or habitats from destructive fishing practices on the high seas. Without the necessary international legal regulation, deep-sea biodiversity will continue to be destroyed and the bottom fisheries of the high seas will follow the pattern of the rest of the planet's fisheries into decline. That laws may be broken is not a good or logical reason not to enact or enforce them. A moratorium on high seas bottom trawling is essential and urgent so that the international community can evaluate deep-sea biodiversity, put laws in place, and ensure the long-term sustainability of the fishery as well as secure the future for deep-sea life while there is still time to do so.

¹ For a comprehensive review and critique of the effects of bottom trawling, see *High Seas Bottom Trawl Red Herring: Debunking Claims of Sustainability*. Marine Conservation Biology Institute 2005.

² Gass, S. Willison, M. (2005). An Assessment of the distribution of deep-sea corals in Atlantic Canada by using both scientific and local forms of knowledge. In Friewald, A., Roberts, M. (eds.) *Cold-Water Corals and Ecosystems*, Springer, Berlin Heidelberg, pp. 223-245.

³ See Matthew Gianni, "High Seas Bottom Trawl Fisheries and their Impacts on the Biodiversity of Vulnerable Deep-Sea Ecosystems," report prepared for IUCN, WWF and NRDC, p 49, at <http://www.iucn.org/themes/marine/pdf/MattGianni-CBDCOP7-Impact-HS-BottomFisheries-Complete.pdf>

⁴ Chuenpagdee et al (2003). *Shifting Gears: Assessing collateral impacts of fishing methods in US waters*. *Frontiers in Ecology and the Environment* 1: 517-524; Morgan, L.E. and R. Chuenpagdee (2003). *Shifting Gears: Addressing the Collateral Impacts of Fishing Methods in U.S. Waters*. Island Press, Washington, DC.