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Providing another perspective on fisheries issues....

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That sky keeps on falling

On it's website, Oceana (the environmental organization which received \$10 million in start-up funds from the Pew Charitable Trusts and is carrying on as if its primary mission is to make life miserable and earning a living impossible for U.S. commercial fishermen) claims that *"Each year, commercial fishing strips bare an area twice the size of the contiguous United States beneath the sea."*

We found it difficult to imagine what "stripping bare" an area of ocean actually means (though it sure sounds bad, particularly when applied to such a big patch of ocean). So, in an attempt to put Oceana's apparently dire and alarming pronouncement into a more understandable context, we did a little research of our own.

The easy part was finding out the area of the contiguous United States. It's roughly 3.3 million square miles. Almost as easy was doubling that area. That's 6.6 million square miles. Calculating how much of that area commercial fishing actually "stripped bare," however, is a bit beyond our meager (remember that we haven't yet been provided with \$10 million of start-up money by the Pew Charitable Trusts) capacity. So we had to consider the issue from another perspective.

Approximately 140 million square miles of the earth's surface is covered with water, almost all salt water and almost all in the oceans. Eleven point nine percent of these ocean waters are less than 1000 meters deep. Little commercial fish-

ing with trawls or dredges takes place in waters deeper than that, so there are approximately 16 million square miles of ocean bottom that are reachable by commercial fishermen and, in Oceana's words, candidates for "stripping."

Thus, according to Oceana, every square mile of ocean within reach is "stripped bare" every three years or less by commercial fishing trawls and dredges. We can only assume this means that everything that was there, living or not, is removed. And this has been going on for decades.

Yet, in spite of this alleged stripping, these same ocean waters continue to produce fish, fish that are being continuously harvested by commercial fishermen at undiminished levels (according to the FAO, fish production from the world's oceans in the years 1994 to 1999 were 84.7, 84.3, 86.0, 86.1, 78.3 and 84.1 million tons - with the lower 1998 production attributable to El Nino affects).

So, are we blessed with communities of organisms on the ocean bottom that, despite the claims of the anti-fishing groups to the contrary, are capable of healing themselves from the scars of commercial fishing, from being "stripped bare," in a year or two? Or is Oceana totally out to sea when it comes to estimating the extent of bottom damage caused by commercial fishing? Borrowing a title from Aretha Franklin....

Who's Zoomin' Who?

We've written before about the propensity of anti-fishing groups to rely on hyperbole when trying to sell their doom-and-gloom messages (see "A good image is hard to find" at <http://www.fishingnj.org/njnet14.htm> or "Anatomy of an anti-fishing campaign" at <http://www.fishingnj.org/netusa6.htm>). We've been exposed to this over-the-top Chicken Little rhetoric for the better part of a decade, a decade when our fisheries clearly haven't self-destructed and in many instances are rebuilding, yet the shrill hysteria continues. Recent examples:

"The House Resources Committee adopted a bill last night that rolls back ocean protections and puts fish populations at risk of collapse. The measure attacks fundamental provisions of current law including bycatch,

".... environmental groups such as Oceana, the Conservation Law Foundation and the American Oceans Campaign are using unreliable data to initiate lawsuits, making fisheries' managers submit to their agenda. In other words, these environmental groups are using the fishing industry as a marketing tool to promote their own existence. They should be held accountable for their actions as well." (from a September 28, 2002 editorial in the New Bedford Standard Times entitled "For too long, fishermen's expertise discarded by feds." For background on the situation that inspired the Standard Times, go to the "Trawlgate" pages at <http://www.fishingnj.org/> and <http://www.bdssr.com/latest/trawl/trawlgate.htm>.)

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overfishing, and habitat protections in ways that diminish safeguards essential to the survival of many fish species.” (Audubon)

“Because of wasteful fishing practices, oversized fleets, habitat destruction and inadequate fisheries management, an estimated 70% of the world’s commercially fished species have been fished to or beyond the brink at which their populations can easily sustain themselves.” (Environmental Defense)

“Our oceans are rapidly being depleted of fish” (website of the TV series “Empty Oceans, Empty Nets”)

“Presently, many of the nation’s major fisheries rely predominantly on destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling and scallop dredging, where fishermen not only catch fish, but also devastate the fish’s habitat,” (Conservation Law Foundation)

“The incidental catch and mortality of marine mammals, seabirds, sea turtles and unwanted fish species or age-groups by various fishery-types, and the destruction of habitat and benthic communities by bottom-dragging fishing gear, are altering food chains and sea-life communities.” (SeaWeb)

These pronouncements certainly raise questions. Have the world’s fisheries been overharvested? Does commercial fishing gear have an impact on habitat? Do commercial fishing techniques sometimes catch unwanted organisms?

Overharvesting

Of course some commercial fisheries have been overharvested, but not all nor even most. The anti-fishing groups invariably ignore the fact that every year more fisheries are removed from the “overfished” list and that many, at least in the U.S. where the massive anti-fishing campaigns are focused, are now in a rebuilding phase. They also, because it gives them much scarier numbers to bounce around, habitually lump overfished and fully exploited fisheries together. But with the growth in the world’s population there’s no reasonable - at least if you have any humanitarian instincts at all - arguments against having fisheries that are fully exploited.

Habitat Impacts

Sure, commercial fishing gear can have an impact on habitat, but which human activities don’t? We’re harvesting almost 100 million tons of seafood from the world’s oceans each year. That’s a lot of fish and crabs and clams. To put this level of harvest in perspective, the world’s annual production of beef, pork and poultry is 50 million, 80 million and 60 million tons respectively.

We all know how much “habitat” is disturbed by cattle, hog and chicken farming. That’s the price we pay for affordable

“The environmental movement has become riddled with extremism, misinformation, misguided priorities and downright deception. It is wonderful that this dogmatic conceit is now being effectively challenged. Let’s put some wind in Lomborg’s sails!” (P.Moore on his website at <http://www.greenspirit.com/lomborg/>. Dr. Moore was a founding member of Greenpeace, President of Greenpeace Canada, and a Director of Greenpeace International.)

animal protein, and we’re willing to add to that price the downstream effects as well. To suggest that we could harvest equivalent amounts of seafood without some level of disturbance to the ocean habitat, or to suggest that this disturbance might not be a price we’re willing to pay, is at best impossibly Pollyannish and at worst a prescription for even more human misery via protein deficiency in the future.

Bycatch

Without argument, commercial fishermen catch untargeted fish and other organisms, but what – if any - impact does this have on the ecosystem? Commercial fishermen are continuously working to reduce bycatch; not just because it’s such an obvious waste, but also because catching it, handling it and getting rid of it involves more wear and tear on the gear and more work on deck.

Interestingly, because of the sheer magnitude of the numbers involved, the importance of bycatch can be – and always is – overblown by the anti-fishing claque. A cover story in Time magazine a few years back claimed (possibly accurately) that *“In 1993...shrimp trawlers in the Gulf of Mexico caught and threw away an estimated 34 million red snappers, including many juveniles.”* Such a statement on its own seems pretty horrendous. But put into the proper context, perhaps it isn’t.

If the author is referring to U.S. waters in the Gulf out to 20 miles, a reasonable estimation of where the U.S. shrimp fleet fishes, then he was writing about somewhere around 18 or 20 million acres of water. Less than two red snapper killed by shrimp trawls per acre of water – and remember that this was back in the days before the use of Bycatch Reduction Devices was mandatory – seems not so horrendous at all. In fact, biologically it could be argued that it reduces the red snapper bycatch issue to a “so what.”

All of these anti-fishing arguments are selling points for a particular agenda, and their success depends on a glossing

Quote of the month

The Conservation Law Foundation has been in the vanguard of so-called “conservationist” organizations suing the federal government over what they consider as too lax fisheries regulations. Of the recent furor over faulty survey gear used to sample fish stocks (<http://www.fishingnj.org>), Foundation scientist Anthony Chatwin is quoted *“CLF continues to have great confidence in New England’s federal fishery scientists.” (Fishermen demand voice, D. Fraser, Cape Cod Times, 09/13/02)*

over or distortion of the admittedly complex science that underlies many fisheries issues.

Is this propensity by the environmental organizations to blow issues way out of proportion limited to those few that have hitched their wagons to the anti-fishing star? Definitely not.

Chicken Little in the non-fishing world

“The Skeptical Environmentalist: Measuring the Real State of the World,” a book by Danish professor of statistics and ex-Greenpeace activist Bjorn Lomborg, convincingly debunks the “science” that underlies many of the “end of the world” pronouncements that the current crop of eco-alarmists are using to swell their coffers (see Tom DeWeese’s *“Massive Wealth Drives Green Agenda”* at <http://www.sharetrails.org/mag/07/index00/story2.htm>) and skew public policy. Not too surprisingly, Dr. Lomborg has come under attack by just about every “environmental” organization out there. Very surprisingly, he has also been targeted by the scientific establishment, even having Scientific American devoting 11 pages to debunking his debunking. In an article discussing the various assaults launched against Dr. Lomborg (personally) and his book, (*The Mau-Mauing of Bjorn Lomborg*, Commentary; 09/02) David Schoenbrod writes:

The release of Lomborg’s book last fall was attended (as I have already noted) by a great deal of publicity all over the world, and the book itself immediately garnered respectful notices in places like the Washington Post and the Economist. This positive reception challenged the power of the environmental movement at a pivotal point: its claim to represent scientific truth. Lomborg may not have been the first to threaten this power, but he was far and away the most dangerous.

A recent article by Roger Pielke, Jr. ([Policy, politics and perspective]in, to its credit, Nature [March, 02]) helps explain why. Writing about the making of environmental policy, Pielke identifies what he calls an “iron triangle” of mutually reinforcing interests:” politicians, scientists, and environmental activists. According to Pielke, politicians are loathe to make controversial decisions on environmental issues and so pass the buck to “science.” The scientists are happy to be given the power, not to mention the research grants that come along with it. The environmentalists lean on the scientists for justification of their policy agenda. Each leg of the triad depends on the others for support.

I would add to Pielke’s triad a fourth element: the staffs of federal agencies, like the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration, that fund research. These agencies can grow their budgets by

presenting issues within their jurisdiction not as problems but as looming catastrophes (to revert to our earlier distinction). This creates an incentive to steer grants to researchers whose work supposedly points to such grave threats, and that in turn creates an incentive for researchers to exaggerate the threat contained in their findings.

We would add to this, at least in the fisheries world, yet another element; large grant-making foundations such as the Pew Charitable Trusts. These foundations, with seemingly unlimited - at least in a fisheries research context - abilities to fund research and with strong commitments to particular agendas, in many cases have much more influence than the involved federal agencies (see **A consumer campaign that missed by a mile** at <http://www.fishingnj.org/njnet15.htm>).

While **The Skeptical Environmentalist** doesn’t address fisheries issues and fisheries alarmism, Dr. Lomborg might just as well have. The actors, the motivations and the overblown “end of the world” rhetoric are all there. The only thing that’s missing is any connection to reality.

What’s this mean for the fishing industry?

The so-called “conservationist” groups can very effectively sell their skewed view of conditions in our fisheries to elected officials, to the media, and to the public. Taking advantage of the complexity of fisheries and ocean issues and the difficulty of ferreting out reliable information, they are finding a receptive audience. In spite of increasingly stringent management plans for virtually every fishery being managed, in spite of many “recovering” fisheries, and in spite of statistics that show that fisheries production - and fisheries income - is not plummeting as their prognostications would lead us to expect, conditions are not yet bad enough for the commercial fishermen. So, bankrolled with tens of millions of foundation dollars, they continue to lobby, to litigate and to propagandize in a seemingly coordinated campaign that the fishing industry can’t afford to counter. Fishermen are the immediate victims, but the U.S. consumer is ultimately going to suffer.

*“Until we learn the intricacies of media culture and the processes by which news is made, we are vulnerable to a daily dose of misunderstanding contained in each morning’s headlines. Indeed, we are at risk of perpetually misdiagnosing our modern world and the role we play in it.” (Introduction to **It Ain’t Necessarily So: How Media Make and Unmake the Scientific Picture of Reality**, D. Murray, J. Schwartz and S.R. Lichter, <http://www.stats.org/book.htm>)*

More information on this and other fisheries issues is available on the NJ Fishing website at <http://www.fishingnj.org>