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## **Blue Growth is Another Pandemic**

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With Covid seen as a threat to humanity, another pandemic has been ignored for far too long. This is the accelerating destruction of fish and other life in the sea. Unless radical policies are introduced very soon, quality fish and shellfish may become luxury items that only the wealthy can afford; some fish most of us have taken for granted will disappear altogether.

It is a global threat. Many fish species have gone from being common and cheap to being rare and over-priced. In the 1940s, bluefin tuna was regarded as an outcast in the Japanese kitchen; now it is so scarce that its price is astronomical. The preferred delicacy of the finest sushi chefs is at 2.7% of its historical population – about the same as the Bengal tiger.

In the North Atlantic, both haddock and cod are now classified as collapsed fish stocks. Wild Atlantic salmon is disappearing. One can multiply the examples. About 60% of the major fish species are under threat.

Pollution, global warming, ocean acidification, hundreds of millions of tonnes of plastic, even intensified noise in the sea and drainage of chemicals via our rivers into the sea are all partly responsible. But the primary culprit is chronic unchecked over-fishing in what is a ‘crimogenic’ industry, that is, a sector of economic activity that is systematically criminal.

Some on the political right, libertarians, dogmatically assert that the problem is lack of private property rights, claiming that it is because the sea is an ‘open access commons’ that over-exploitation takes place. This is untrue. Since UNCLOS in 1982, and in some countries beforehand, individual countries own all the sea up to 200 nautical miles from their coastline, as Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Many have privatised fishing in their EEZ, drawing up ‘total allowable catches’ (TACs) of various prized fish and issuing ‘quotas’, many allowing quotas to be ‘transferable’, that is, sold on to other fisheries.

Neither governments nor industrial fisheries obey their own rules. Under the EU’s Common Fishery Policy, ministers in charge of fishing matters meet annually to decide on TACs. They are supposed to be guided by a scientific committee that monitors fish stocks. But regularly the ministers decide on TACs greater than recommended.

Then at country level, most of the quotas have a habit of going to large-scale corporations that use fishing methods that decimate not only the species they are seeking but also many others, innocently called ‘bycatch’. Millions of unwanted fish are thrown overboard, dead or dying.

Industrial fisheries, vast vessels, are allowed to switch ‘flags of convenience’ to avoid their own national rules. The large corporate fisheries also systematically abuse the quota rules. Every now and then, one is caught, as one powerful Spanish family firm has been, and as a UK-registered Dutch-owned trawler was recently, having 638,000 kilos of illegally caught mackerel on board. But then, almost always, the firm is fined a small fraction of their illegal fish and allowed to continue, without losing their licence or quota.

The situation is made even worse by the fact that governments give the fishing industry huge subsidies, most notably fuel subsidies, which we as taxpayers pay. This has made fishing beyond acceptable limits much cheaper. But it has also made possible the worst feature of industrial fishing, namely long-distance fishing by super-trawlers.

So, in effect, globally it is really a matter of not only plundering our own country's waters but roaming the world's oceans to plunder everybody else's too, as well as that part still unowned by any country, known as the 'high seas', or 'the Area'. Everybody connected with fisheries is acting as if they have gone mad.

The UK's Overseas Development Institute, in collaboration with Global Fishing Watch, used sophisticated technology to reveal that the Chinese long-distance fleet is five times larger than had been thought, estimating that in 2020 it had 16,966 vessels. Recently, a fleet of 340 vessels were found off the precious Galapagos Islands, many trying to avoid identification by switching off their satellite communications.

China and Russia have taken over as the leading villains conducting chronic over-fishing and illegal fishing, using supertrawlers and factory ships and finely-meshed nets that stretch for several kilometres, scouring the seabed, doing irreparable damage to reefs and marine ecosystems. But European fishing fleets started the plunder, and still do so today.

Anybody in Spain who loves fish and the beauty of the oceans should look in the mirror with shame at shared responsibility. For instance, due to over-fishing in the Indian Ocean, the regional authorities in 2017 required all fisheries to reduce their catches. In 2019, South Africa complained to the European Commission that the Spanish fleet had illegally increased its catch of yellowfin tuna. The Commission found that the Spanish vessels had taken 30% more than allowed.

What happened next is also shockingly irresponsible. The fleet has merely been told they must take 30% less next year. That is no deterrent to destructive practices. If taken as a precedent, everybody knows that the worst that can happen for breaking the rules is no loss!

What is to be done? Regional fishery bodies have been disgracefully under-funded. The World Bank and other multilateral financial bodies should put more money where their mouths go. In Europe, the total budget for fisheries comes to just 0.75%, a dribble to finance activities in the seas all around its member countries. It amounts to saying we do not really care.

Second, governments and international organisations must genuinely enforce laws and regulations, not pretend to do so. Fines for over-fishing must be sufficient to be genuine deterrents, and bans from fishing must be imposed for second offenders.

Third, fishing authorities must stop thinking aquaculture, or fish farming, will take care of future fish needs. Not only is that attitude ecologically deplorable but there are inherent dangers with aquaculture, as numerous accidents demonstrate.

Fourth, the protracted international negotiations over a Convention for preserving biodiversity in the seas must be brought to a swift conclusion, without excuses for yet more delays. They were meant to reach conclusion in the fourth round in March this year. It felt as if Covid came just in time to give the negotiators a convenient excuse to postpone the supposedly final negotiations. Perhaps instead of one comprehensive deal, they could separate out the least contentious issues. The oceans and marine life in them do not have time on their side.

Fifth, the European Union should set an example – finally – by phasing out fuel subsidies to fisheries without further delay. No excuses should be accepted. For years, there has been a political and economic consensus that they are unjustifiable. But political cowardice and opportunism have blocked real progress.

Sixth, we must reverse the neoliberal ‘blue growth’ model that depicts the seas as the new economic frontier of globalisation, ignoring the interests and wisdom of ‘blue commoners’, the artisans of the sea. Local communities have learned over many generations how to nurture and reproduce their environment and the resources in it. But in recent decades they have been swept aside, their impoverishment depicted merely as a regrettable externality.

Rich countries have done deals with economically weak countries to permit their long-distance fisheries to over-fish and then create ‘marine protection areas’, where local small-scale fishers are banned from fishing, to make up for the overfishing. It is cynical.

That must stop. But it will not stop unless we put pressure on our governments and the multilateral bodies that are meant to support the interests of weaker nations to change what they are doing. For the future of the Blue Planet, governments must have the political courage to support small-scale fishers rather than the industrial giants responsible for the destruction of fish populations. There is no time to lose.

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