

Global perspectives



Global Perspectives: Overfishing

I have to admit, overfishing is not such a big deal in Hong Kong since Hong Kong fishing boats are usually small to medium-sized crafts which do not play a major role to overfishing. Hong Kong is also not heavily affected by overfishing problems as our fish prices are not affected nor is our fish stock. However I choose to report on overfishing as I believe, as a global citizen, I must take the initiative to be aware of these global problems.

Introduction

Imagine a day where a small serving of fish and chips on your dinner plate becomes a rare and expensive delicacy. That day may not be too far away. Scientists believe that overfishing is the biggest threat to the marine ecosystem. If nothing is done now, it is believed that there will be profound changes in our oceans that can never be reverted.

So, why is overfishing dangerous? Who and why are people involved in overfishing? What will happen if overfishing continues? The answers to these questions will surely depend the understanding of overfishing from an international, regional and personal perspective.

What Is Overfishing?

Overfishing is simply the process of taking so many fish from a body of water that the number of fish in it becomes very low. There are generally 3 types of overfishing. They are growth overfishing, recruit overfishing and ecosystem overfishing.

Growth overfishing is the process of catching fish before they are fully grown resulting in a decrease in the average size of the fish population. This type of

overfishing does not have such a big impact on the ecosystem but poses more of a problem for the economy as the potential profit from the fish is reduced.

Recruit overfishing is when is when the mature adult population is depleted to a level where it no longer has the reproductive capacity to replenish itself. There are not enough adults to produce offspring. This type of overfishing is a serious environmental as it is one of the main reasons why there is a dwindling number in certain species of fish.

Ecosystem overfishing, the main focus of my report, is when the balance of the ecosystem is altered due to overfishing. This happens when declines in the number of large predatory species causes the number of smaller species to increase resulting imbalance of the ecosystem towards smaller species of fish. I. e. there will be much more small fish than big fish

What's The Situation?

According to the information from official UN figures, I have created a pie chart showing how today's fisheries are affected by overfishing.

The meaning of exploiting in this context refers to the “ maximum sustainable production level” of the fish. This means that 76% (52+17+7+1) of all fisheries have already reached or surpassed the “ maximum sustainable production level” of fish.

Who Is Causing It? Why?

I believe those main groups responsible for overfishing are the fishing industries. They see fishing as an opportunity to make profits and they only

care about how much money they make. However, sometimes the fishing industry has to make sacrifices just like any other business.

Out of the many fishing vessels out on the seas only 1.6% of these ships belong to large fishing industries, now this may seem like a good thing but it is not. These 1.6% of ships catch 60% of all the fish caught in the world. This is why I placed the fishing industry as the top contributor of overfishing.

There are many reasons as to why the fishing industry has to fish so much fish. Firstly, modern technology has allowed people to catch fish in a larger scale more quickly than in the past. Also, there is a greater demand for fish since fish have better nutritional values, it seems like more people are going for fish than before. Another reason is that fishing industries make billions of dollars through overfishing, that's why they almost can't stop fishing. Finally high demands for fish cause the fishing industries to compete for fish, catching as many as they can. They catch so many fish in such a short amount of time that the fish cannot reproduce fast enough to meet such high demands.

Overfishing And China

China, being a country located next to the sea, is naturally a blooming fishing market. In fact, China's 2005 reported catch of wild fish, caught in rivers, lakes, and the sea, was 17.1 million tons, far ahead of the second-ranked nation, the United States, which reported 4.9 million tons.

So China is indeed the world's largest exporter of fish and fish products. In 2005, China exported 7.7 billion dollars worth of fish. In addition, China is also the world's 6th largest importer of fish and fish products totaling up to a

value of US\$4 billion. In total, China makes on average US\$11.7 billion in the fishing industry.

Since most of Hong Kong's fish is imported from China, I feel Hong Kong's fish stocks should be controlled. I, from personal experience, have noticed that many of Hong Kong's families eat fish regardless of income. Since Hong Kong is a coastal city which started off as a small fishing town, it is understandable that Hong Kongers like to eat fish. However, I believe that the public are unaware of the overfishing crisis that is taking place and thus I believe that the Hong Kong public must be educated on the situation. I myself do eat fish occasionally but since I only eat fish occasionally I do not believe I am strongly contributing to overfishing.

What Is So Bad About Overfishing?

Overfishing is a global problem with many serious social, economic and environmental implications. Because of overfishing almost half of the world's fishing industries have lost billions of dollars (\$US50 billion) due to drop in fish stock, a direct result of overfishing.

Fish is also a very important part of many people's diet. For many African and South Asian coastal nations, fish may account for as much as 50 per cent of protein in a typical diet. The decline of fish stocks in coastal waters as the result of overfishing is making this important resource much less accessible for some of the world's poorest citizens.

Most importantly overfishing plays a major role in the marine environment. The main problem is the breakdown of the food chain amongst the marine creatures. For example, recent studies suggest that overfishing of large

shark species has had a ripple effect in the shark's food chain, increasing the number of species, such as rays, that are usual prey for large sharks, which result in declining stocks of smaller fish and shellfish favoured by these species.

What Now?

Scientists believe that if overfishing continues fish populations will continue to dwindle. As much as 50% all of the fishing ships will become redundant (they would not catch any more fish even if they were there). Fish prices will start to rise and it will become increasingly difficult for poorer people to afford fish products.

I too agree with this statement, if nothing is done to stop overfishing we will soon plunge into a fish crisis. I believe that we and the governments play an important role in controlling that amount of fish we catch. For example, in 1992, the population of the Atlantic Cod fish off the coast of Canada (at an island called Newfoundland) suddenly collapsed. The fish were dying out. As a result, the Canadian government imposed an indefinite fishing moratorium (ban) on this area.

Another growing problem is overfishing in the deep sea. Some deep sea fishes included the Orange Roughy, Patagonian Toothfish and the sablefish. These fish grow slowly in their deep sea environment because of limited food, slow metabolism, low reproductive rates, and many don't reach breeding maturity for 30 to 40 years. A fillet of Orange Roughy at the store is probably at least 50 years old. Most deep sea fish are in international waters, where there are no legal protections.

From that scenario I can say that there is a need for international laws for fishing in international waters. These laws could limit the amount of catch a boat can fish for, or the duration the boat stays in the designated fishing zones.

My Say

In conclusion, I hope that one day the world's leaders will treat overfishing more seriously and take serious action to tackle overfishing. I hope that more laws will be made to regulate the amount of fish in our waters. I hope that by the time that's done, it's not too late.

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