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Viva! is the largest vegetarian campaigning organisation in Europe. It's head office is in Bristol UK, with a second office in Warsaw, Poland. It has been active for 15 years and specialises in filmed, undercover investigations, particularly intensive factory farms.

Oceans

The addiction to animal protein that is wreaking havoc on earth is matched by the devastation being caused to the oceans by overfishing for yet another source of animal protein. As on land, the situation is exacerbated by large-scale pollution.

Fishing is one of the most monitored, researched and studied of activities carried out by humans and yet this 'management' has been futile and ineffective in safeguarding the oceans and its creatures. Humankind's mismanagement of the seven seas is a lesson in stupidity, greed and disregard for the natural world.

Canada is an example of how little is understood about the complexities of the marine ecosystems. In the 1960s, 800,000 tons of cod were caught every year off the East coast of Newfoundland. In 1975, only 300,000 tons could be found and by the 1980s it was down to 250,000 tons. Despite this rapid decline, scientists continued to give the go-ahead claiming that a catch of this size was sustainable indefinitely.

In 1992, devastation struck with a complete collapse of the fishery. Total cod stocks in these once teeming waters were estimated at just 1,700. Again scientists showed their lack of understanding when they maintained that stocks would quickly recover. They didn't and show no signs of doing so.

Icelandic and European cod stocks are now heading in the same direction. There is no argument that fishing at the present level is unsustainable and yet the number of fish caught has doubled in 30 years.

In 2003, the UK had 7,283 fishing vessels which landed 631,000 tonnes of fish valued at £521 million. A further 200,000 tonnes valued at £1,437 million was imported. The total global catch stood at 93.2 million tonnes in 2002 with a further 39.8 million tonnes from fish farms.

The year 2000 was the high water mark for fish catches when 94.8 million tonnes was caught. Despite bigger ships, and high tech gear such as fish-finding sonar and satellite navigation, largely funded with massive subsidies the global catch is now declining.

In 2002, the UN FAO declared that 75 per cent of the world's fisheries are either fully exploited, over exploited or significantly depleted. In 2003, the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) issued a warning that only 18 per cent of fish stocks were within safe biological limits – in other words, that 82 per cent of all fish stocks are on the road to extinction.

When one species has started to decline, the industry has simply moved on to another species and no attempt is made to monitor the effect of exploiting these often new species. In the 1980s, they began

to exploit some of the world's deepest oceans and effectively swept the sea bed clean. Most were turned into fish cakes and crab sticks.

At these extraordinary cold depths fish grow and reproduce very slowly, some species living for 150 years and reproducing only when they reach 30. Stocks have now collapsed but the huge investment in gear means that the fishing continues.

As well as seeking new species of fish, the fishing industry is constantly descending the marine ladder – fishing lower and lower down the food chain. Catching ever-smaller fish seriously compromises the recovery of depleted big fish.

There have been many studies charting the decline of fish stocks, including one in 2003 which found that 90 per cent of common fish such as tuna, cod, halibut and flounder have disappeared since the 1950s. Cod, sturgeon, skate, haddock, swordfish and all species of tuna, except skipjack, are listed as vulnerable or globally endangered by the World Conservation Union.

According to the Commission for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Northeast Atlantic (OSPAR), 40 of the 60 main commercial fish stocks in this huge area risk extinction or are being heavily overfished. It is a similar story in the North Sea and Baltic. One half of all the fish landed by UK ships in 2004 were from unsustainable sources. Even the noble salmon has seen its numbers collapse by half in 20 years, according to the Marine Conservation Society. This magnificent species is now listed as 'threatened' by OSPAR.

The extraordinary number of warnings and recommendations from the most authoritative sources has been consistently ignored by politicians. In 2002 and 2003, ICES called for a total ban on cod fishing in the North Sea, Baltic and Irish Seas and an end to deep water fishing. It was ignored. In 2004, the **RCEP** called for an end to deep sea trawling in UK waters and the closure of 30 per cent of coastal fishing grounds. It was ignored. It also demanded that the seas should be treated similarly to an endangered land habitat. It was again ignored.

In fact, EU fishing policies are exacerbating the situation, as Fisheries Commissioner Joe Borg made clear in 2007. He revealed that every year, billions of dead fish are dumped back in the sea – 500,000 to 800,000 tonnes – because they are too small or are in excess of the allowed quota. Almost all these discarded fish die. Worst offenders are sole fishermen in the Southern North Sea whose small mesh nets capture almost everything, with up to 90 per cent of the catch being discarded. A similar situation exists all over the world.

Rather than being called to account for this vandalism, between 2000 and 2006, the EU provided 4.1 billion Euros in subsidies to the fishing industry, with individual countries providing a further 2 billion Euros.

The rape of the oceans for fish is only one aspect of the onslaught they face. Pollution with flame retardants, PCBs, dioxin, mercury and other persistent organic pollutants, along with pesticides, fertilisers and heavy metals from farming, have contaminated virtually every oceanic creature. The higher up the food chain, the greater the concentration of pollution.

We can only guess what the long term effects of this will be on sea creatures and those humans who eat them, thus placing themselves at the very top of the food chain. Despite this, the UK government promotes fish for health because of the omega-3 essential fatty acids it contains when there are better, safer and pollution-free plant sources readily available.

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