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Fisheries Bright Future

Recent reports on the status of world fisheries paint an incomplete picture of the ocean. In *Nature*, two Canadian scientists, Ransom Myers and Boris Worm suggest that only ten percent of large open ocean fish remain in the sea. This week, the Pew Oceans Commission and environmental groups released reports that say our oceans are in crisis. The fact is most major US stocks which make up 99% of US landings are under sustainable management. The 16% of major stocks that are overfished are either recovering under rebuilding plans or otherwise protected by federal law.

Results from the Myers and Worm article were widely published in the news media. Their study used population trajectories constructed from historical fishing records to conclude that there was a worldwide depletion of predatory fish communities. However, top international fishery scientists who specialize in large predatory communities have now called the analysis simplistic using only a subset of the available fisheries data and assumptions that are, at best, weakly supported.

The conclusions put forth by Myers and Worm that entire populations of large pelagic fish have been reduced by ninety percent are not consistent with catch data or measurements of population dynamics by stock assessment scientists who follow and are responsible for the management of these species. Scientists from the InterAmerican Tropical Tuna Commission report that longline catch rates alone, which were used in the study are not a good indication of the size of a population especially since only around ten percent of the large ocean stocks in the Eastern Pacific are caught by this gear.

The most recent assessments for yellowfin and skipjack tuna, which are by far the predominant species in the pelagic fisheries of the Eastern Pacific show that these stocks are being managed at sustainable levels. What the research does suggest is that the age structure of the large pelagic populations has changed. The longline fisheries examined fished selectively for large individuals, so assessments based on these fisheries alone might well confirm a drop in the presence of older, larger fish. However, stock assessments based on all available data including data from the more prevalent purse seine fishery which fish on relatively younger age groups show more stable populations.

Whether the purported historical decline in global catch rates is related to reductions in fish abundance or just an artifact of flawed assumptions in the analysis, it should be noted that it would have taken place primarily in the middle of the last century, before management structures were put into place. That is not the case today.

As Dr. Sissenwine, Chief Scientist from the National Marine Fisheries Service, pointed out in a recent National Public Radio interview, "I think it would be unnecessary to overreact to simply the warning that these problems exist without understanding that in fact there are lots of measures being taken, a very aggressive U.S. regulatory program as well as worldwide, to try to address them." Ransom Myers who also participated in the

interview agreed, “I think Mike is right in terms of the U.S. In many areas aggressive management has worked. When fisheries management is used and used effectively, there is not a concern about the biomass reducing by a factor of 50 or even 60 or even probably 70 percent.”

Over the past few years, there have been many “oceans in crisis” reports that overstate concerns to gain public attention. The release of the Pew Oceans Commission report offers the potential to move from crisis to constructive dialog, but industry leaders anticipate more of the same. Efforts to improve science-based management are needed. The sensationalism and public confusion created by many ocean campaigns are not.

What is often overlooked is the progress that has been achieved by the thousands of dedicated fishery scientists and well-established national and international programs in place to assure sustainable management of the oceans. The recovery of North Atlantic swordfish, New England groundfish and scallops; the success of cooperative industry management and research partnerships in the North Pacific and Atlantic fisheries; and the remarkable progress with endangered sea turtle recovery and reduction of shrimp fishery bycatch in the Gulf of Mexico demonstrate that our system of management is working.

We are in a period of conservative management where a precautionary approach, ecosystem considerations, closed areas, bycatch reduction, and essential fish habitat are already part of the regulatory process. Recent efforts have focused on the impacts of fishing on the environment, while research on the impacts of the environment on fishing is just beginning. “El Nino” like ocean events have caused stocks to rise and fall for hundreds of years long before fishing existed. In fact, the frequently cited crash of the Monterey sardine fishery had more to do with regime shifts in the ocean than fishing.

There are challenges to overcome with overcapacity in some fisheries, and illegal and unregulated fishing, but there are also proven solutions for these problems that showcase what sustainable fishing practices can achieve. There is no doubt that we haven’t seen the last fish crisis headline. Still, I’m optimistic about the future of the oceans.

Thor J Lassen is president of Ocean Trust, a non-profit foundation bringing science, conservation and food communities together for the sustainability of the oceans.