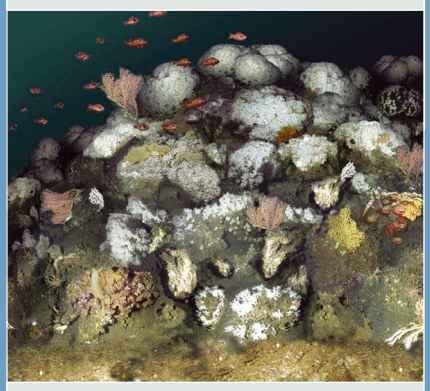
Protecting the Deep

CBD COP-7 must call on the United Nations General Assembly to pass a Resolution stopping all bottom trawling on the High Seas in order to protect the incredible biological diversity of the deep sea until such time as legally binding regimes exist to effectively conserve and regulate it.

Photo: © Institute of Marine Research, Bergen, Norway, and Statoil.

Protect Life in the Deepwater Rainforests

Marine scientists have recently come to understand that the deep sea contains great reservoirs of the earth's biological diversity.



Due to poor light conditions and an abundance of particles in the water it is difficult to present an overview photo of a Lophelia-reef. Therefore we have combined several photos taken from manned submersible and ROVs to show a "representative" reef. On the top of the reef the hemispherical living colonies are found. Below this zone living colonies of varying size are found with dead corals in between. At the base of the reef there is a zone characterised by fragments of coral mixed with sand and mud. *Paragorgia* and other gorgonians are common on the reefs. Redfish, *Sebastes spp.* are often seen in considerable numbers in connection with the reefs.

Stopping the Clear-Cutting of the Oceans Rainforests

Bottom trawlers are huge fishing vessels that drag heavy equipment along the bottom of the sea floor, destroying and scooping up everything in their path. Deep-sea bottom trawling on the High Seas (ocean areas beyond national jurisdiction) by a limited number of fishing vessels is effectively 'clear-cutting' these areas, destroying their inhabitants, even before scientists have had an opportunity to explore and explain their roles in our planet's functioning. The seamounts, cold water coral reefs and other vulnerable habitats that form the focal points of deep-sea biological diversity, are home to highly specialized [organic] communities that are believed to be as species-rich as terrestrial rainforests and tropical coral reefs.

Marine scientists have recently come to understand that the deep sea contains great reservoirs of the earth's biological diversity. Seamounts and deep-sea cold water coral reefs, pinnacles and other geographical structures, harbour rich, diverse biological communities with a high degree of endemism. (1)

Deep sea species are typically slow-growing, long-lived and reproduce at a late age, with few offspring. This makes them particularly sensitive to disturbance. Some of the fish species of these deep-sea ecosystems have life spans extending beyond 150 years. Because of the intense cold and lack of light, deep-sea corals grow extremely slowly, and live reefs may be more than 30,000 years old.

The impacts of deep-sea bottom trawling in these areas can be compared to the clear-cutting of old-growth forests: a single trawl, dragged along the ocean floor simply lays waste to an entire biologically diverse community in search of the few fish species that live among them that can be sold at market. Whole ecosystems, including many rare and as yet unidentified species, are destroyed and lost forever in order to catch a few fish that are not valued very highly by consumers anyway.

1) Species that live only in one restricted area and nowhere else (e.g. on one or a few seamounts)

Greenpeace calls on the CBD

The Parties to the CBD made an important commitment at COP-6 in the Hague Ministerial Declaration:

"We … resolve to strengthen our efforts to put in place measures to halt biodiversity loss, which is taking place at an alarming rate, at the global, regional, sub-regional and national levels by the year 2010".

Photo: © Institute of Marine Research, Bergen, Norway.

As the future guardians of the planet, we have the right to receive a planet rich in life.

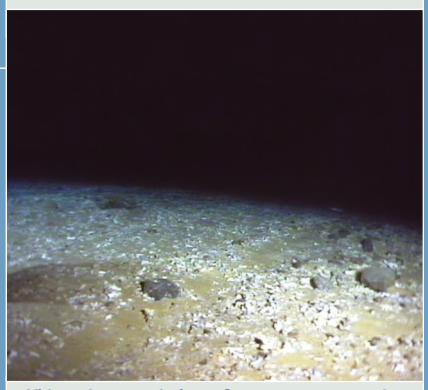
As the principal international body for the conservation of biological diversity, the Parties to the CBD must make clear their support for a global Moratorium on High Seas trawling. Failure to recommend such strong protection by the UN General Assembly would render the CBD unable to fulfil its mandate to conserve a large portion of the world's biological diversity.

A COP-7 Resolution calling on the UN General Assembly to take urgent action to protect the biodiversity of seamounts, deep sea coral reefs and other biodiversity hotspots on the high seas of the world's oceans, including a moratorium on bottom trawling, would be a significant step by the international community towards halting and then reversing the decline in the world's biological diversity.

Life on the planet is rapidly disappearing, our forests are being destroyed and our oceans are being depleted. Local peoples are being robbed of the natural resources they need for their survival. At this year's CBD governments must stop this destruction and honour the commitments they have already made to stop the trend of biodiversity loss.

Fragments and larger pieces of dead *Lophelia pertusa* from a trawling ground near Iverryggen on the Norwegian continental shelf at 190 m depth, 17 May 1999. The bottom substrate is apparently severely disturbed.

Sebastes marinus and *S. viviparus* are the two most common fish species on the deep-water Lophelia reefs. They may lie resting directly on the corals or school above the reefs. Catches of *Sebastes* from long-line can be up to 6 times larger in areas with corals compared to those without.



Video photograph from Sørmannsneset at the Norwegian continental break, 220 m depth (16 May 1998), showing a barren landscape with crushed remains of *Lophelia*-skeleton spread over the area. This is a region subject to considerable bottom trawling. A track can be seen stretching from bottom-left to up-right of the photograph, indicating the path of a trawl.

Governments must provide money for this urgently needed protection instead of wasting it on wars and activities that ultimately end life rather than protect it. Instead of having endless discussions about the devastation, governments must stop the destruction now. As the future guardians of the planet, we have the right to receive a planet rich in life.