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THE THREAT OF BOTTOM TRAWL FISHING TO VULNERABLE DEEP-SEA ECOSYSTEMS

Highlights from the Report of the United Nations Secretary General (DOALOS)

On July 14, 2006, the UN Secretary General released a Report* on actions taken by States and Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) to protect cold-water corals, seamounts and other vulnerable marine ecosystems from destructive fishing practices, including deep-sea bottom trawling on the high seas. The report was requested by the General Assembly in its Sustainable Fisheries Resolution of 2005.

The report concludes:

"Some States have undertaken, or are in the process of undertaking extensive efforts to protect some fishery habitat areas within their national jurisdiction, in particular through the establishment of protected areas. However, this is not the case in the high seas, though deep sea habitats in these areas are extremely vulnerable and require protection." (para. 203)

The UN Secretary General's report clearly indicates that while a number of processes have been initiated at regional levels, no high seas areas of the Atlantic, Pacific or Indian Oceans have yet been closed to bottom trawl fishing to protect deep-sea ecosystems with the exception of four seamount clusters in the Northeast Atlantic (of the tens of thousands of seamounts estimated to lie in high seas areas worldwide) and a small section of the mid-Atlantic ridge. Elsewhere, only the Southern Ocean around Antarctica is effectively closed to bottom trawl fishing unless it can be proved to be harmless to the marine environment. In the Mediterranean Sea, a number of high seas areas have been declared off limits to bottom trawl fishing, including all areas beneath 1000 metres.

The Report reinforces the call by over 1000 marine scientists, the IUCN World Conservation Congress, the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) and a growing number of governments, that a moratorium on high seas bottom trawl fishing is needed as a precautionary measure until effective conservation and management measures have been established.

There are numerous paragraphs in the Secretary General's report outlining the vulnerability of deep-sea ecosystems and the threat posed by bottom trawl fishing in these ecosystems.

These include:

C. Impacts of fishing practices, including bottom trawling, on vulnerable marine ecosystems

1(b). Destructive practices: Trawling and dredging

29. Among all the fishing gears currently used particular concern has been raised over the adverse impacts of bottom trawling on vulnerable marine ecosystems and their associated biodiversity. Bottom trawling raises two main issues. One concern, common to all fishing gear, is the sustainability of the exploitation of target fish stocks due to excess fishing effort or capacity. The second is the ecosystem impacts of trawl fisheries deriving from: (i) the inadequate selectivity of trawl nets and consequent impact on target species (through capture of juveniles) and non-target species whether discarded or not; and (ii) their physical impact on the bottom, and its fauna and the resulting damage to vulnerable ecosystems as critical habitats for marine biodiversity.

32. While there is some evidence to suggest that bottom-set longlines, bottom-set gillnets, pots and traps (including when "ghost fishing"), all may be impacting the deep-sea, bottom trawling and dredging appear to be having the most obvious disruptive impact due to their widespread use and their contact with the bottom.

2. Impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems

44. ...Most fisheries on seamounts often follow "boom and bust" cycles. Most of these aggregating species are easily fished towards depletion, sometimes within one season. For many species, the recovery of such stocks takes several decades.

2 (c). Impacts on benthic ecosystems

50. Deep-sea habitats are particularly sensitive to anthropogenic disturbance due to the longevity, slow growth, low reproductive rates and endemism of the individuals that structure the habitat, their susceptibility to increased sedimentation, their fragility and limited ability to recover from physical fragmentation. A large number of studies have documented the effects of mobile fishing gear on benthic habitat, including the loss of habitat complexity, shifts in community structure, and changes in ecosystem processes.

52. A number of studies provide evidence of damage to deep-sea benthic communities. For example, damage to benthic invertebrates on seamounts by fishing activities has been well documented. Also impacted are deep-water precious corals which often occur in the area of seamounts. With their slow grow rates and often low levels of recruitment, if depleted, coral community recovery could take centuries.

53. ... Some species of sponges appear so fragile that they totally disintegrate when hit by the pressure wave from trawl gear.

VII. Conclusions

203. Some States have undertaken, or are in the process of undertaking extensive efforts to protect some fishery habitat areas within their national jurisdiction, in particular through the establishment of protected areas. However, this is not the case in the high seas, though deep sea habitats in these areas are extremely vulnerable and require protection.

204. It appears that by and large fishing on newly discovered resources or those serving a new market opportunity proceed unregulated through their development period and beyond. Many fisheries are not managed until they are overexploited and clearly depleted and, because of the high vulnerability of deep-sea species to exploitation and their low potential for recovery, this is of particular concern for these stocks. This raises the question of the urgent need for interim measures in particular circumstances, pending the adoption of conservation and management regimes.

207. It appears that, beyond the "first level" of visual, short-term impacts on biodiversity, there is uncertainty on the long-term detrimental impacts of trawling on vulnerable marine ecosystems, and further research is urgently needed. In this regard, the application of the precautionary approach needs to be emphasized.

Based on the findings of this long-awaited report, the DSCC calls on governments to take the urgent action called for under GA resolution 59/25 during the Sustainable Fisheries Resolution negotiations scheduled for October and November of 2006. The conclusions are clear and indisputable. Our oceans cannot afford to wait any longer for interim action to protect deep-sea ecosystems on the high seas from the destructive impact of high seas bottom trawling.

* "The Impacts of Fishing on Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems: Actions taken by States and regional fisheries management organizations and arrangements to give effect to paragraphs 66 to 69 of General Assembly resolution 59/25 on sustainable fisheries, regarding the impacts of fishing on vulnerable marine ecosystems"

The Secretary General's full report can be found at:

http://www.un.org/Depts/los/general_assembly/documents/impact_of_fishing.pdf

Additional comments on the report by the DSCC can be found at:

<http://www.savethehighseas.org/display.cfm?ID=129> including a map which shows just how little of the high seas has been protected from deep-sea bottom trawling to date.