

28 May 2003

The Honourable Robert G. Thibault
HOUSE OF COMMONS
Minister, Fisheries and Oceans Canada
Parliament Buildings, Wellington Street
Ottawa, Ontario,
Canada, K1A 0A6

Dear Minister Thibault:

As you are no doubt aware, two weeks ago the cover article in *Nature*, arguably the world's top general scientific journal, reported a joint Canadian-German study showing that, after only five decades of industrial fishing, the world's commercial fishing fleet had succeeded in stripping 90% of large economically valuable and ecologically critical fish species from the sea. My colleagues in fisheries science suggest the situation is actually worse, that the overall fish biomass of much of the world's oceans has been reduced by up to 90% and that, as the most valued top carnivores are depleted, fishers everywhere are compensating by "fishing down the food web." This may help to maintain gross catches, but raises fears that we will merely repeat the sequence of over-exploitation at lower trophic levels in marine ecosystems. (Indeed, we are seeing the potential unfolding of this scenario here in Canada, where ineffective management has essentially destroyed North Atlantic cod and other fin-fish stocks, and pitted fishers against each other as they squabble over rights of access to crab and shrimp 'fisheries.')

The depletion of the oceans is an all but unprecedented global ecological (and potentially human) tragedy, yet after a mere day or so in the news, this story seems to have disappeared from public consciousness. Given the scale of the problem, I would have expected that, by now, responsible government agencies in Canada and elsewhere would be all but falling over each other to reassure their citizens that they will respond appropriately to the implosion of ocean fisheries before the process leads to the (essentially permanent) collapse of key marine ecosystems. Note that life in some parts of the sea has already been but reduced to little more than algae, bacteria and jellyfish. In tragedy lies opportunity.

I would urge you, as Minister of Fisheries of Canada (one of the nations responsible for the sorry state of world fisheries) to assume affirmative world leadership on this issue. As minister, you should announce that this country, through Fisheries Canada, intends to convene as soon as possible a major international congress on fisheries science and global fisheries management. The ultimate goal would be a consensus scientific report on the state of the oceans with an emphasis on marine fisheries and, most important, an international management plan designed significantly to reduce global fishing effort and enable the recovery of fish stocks for sustainable use by future generations. We have no choice but to reduce humanity's "ecological footprint" in the sea.

The industrial world proclaims itself as the first mainly knowledge-based culture and economy. Let's prove it by responding to the growing body of scientific evidence that humanity is destroying the ecological basis of its own existence. Canada should be proud to assume leadership in this endeavour—indeed, in the circumstances, it is the responsible thing to do.

Respectfully submitted,
William E. Rees, PhD
Professor

University of British Columbia
School of Community and Regional Planning
6333 Memorial Road
Vancouver, BC, Canada
V6T 1Z2

Phone: 1 604 822-2937;
Fax: 1 604 822-3787
SCARP Website: www.scarp.ubc.ca/

- c. Hon. Jean Chretien, Prime Minister of Canada
Hon. David Anderson, Minister of Environment