



Deep trouble for deep-water species

Paris, 2 October 2012

A new study reveals severe mismanagement of European deep-water stocks, according to this week's online version of the journal *Ocean & Coastal Management*.

Sebastian Villasante and coauthors have analyzed scientific recommendations and total allowable catches concerning deep-sea fish stocks from 2002 to 2011. This is the first systematic analysis of the efficacy of the EU management regime for deepwater species. The study concludes that in 60% of cases, quotas for deep-sea species were higher than the value recommended by scientists and that the catch exceeded the quotas in 50% of cases.

"On average, when the catch overshot the quota, it exceeded it by 3.5 times, however in some instances, catches were up to 28 times higher than the approved quotas for deep-sea species" explained Sebastian Villasante, from the University of Santiago de Compostela in Spain.

"Our study shows that the European Council holds little regard for scientific advice on sustainable catches and that the fishing industry does not comply with agreed catch limits. It is no surprise that the exploitation of deep-sea stocks lies "outside safe biological limits", according to the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES)" commented co-author Telmo Morato from the University of the Azores in Portugal.

"Part of the problem is that new fisheries develop much faster than what scientific communities and policy-makers can keep up with", says Henrik Österblom from the Stockholm Resilience Centre. "The consequence is that some of the most important data about the species are gathered long after the stock has actually collapsed."

The study demonstrates that the mean longevity of species caught by the EU fleet increased with depth, from about 13 years for shallow water species to about 25 years for intermediate species and about 60 years for deep-sea species. Thereby, fishing deeper means fishing for increasingly long-lived and vulnerable species.

Results also indicate that the bathymetric expansion of the EU fleet in the 1950–2006 period is twice that of the global fleet. Thus, EU fishing vessels have increased their fishing depth by an average of 78 meters, while the world's fleet has only expanded its average fishing depth by 42 meters.

"This paper shows that the exploitation of deep-water species poses serious problems in addition to those previously identified by scientists such as the huge amount of bycatch species (approximately 100) affected by deep-sea trawlers and the destruction of the deep marine environment. Overshooting the scientific advice and the agreed catch limits only adds to a dire situation and sends a clear message that we are very far from a sustainable and well-managed fishery" Claire Nouvian, co-author of the study and founder of the non-profit organization BLOOM, commented today.

"The repeated failure of EU Member States to respect approved quotas, which are often too high to begin with, shows just how difficult it is to manage these deep-sea fisheries" concludes Matthew Gianni, co-author and consultant on deep-sea fisheries in the Netherlands. "Some deep-sea fisheries catch upwards of 50 or more species and both the catch and bycatch of all species needs to be much more strictly regulated and reported. A comprehensive overhaul of the EU's management regime for deep-sea fisheries is needed to ensure the long-term sustainability of deep-sea species, in particular those species which we know very little about but which are highly vulnerable to fishing."

This study is published while the regulation offering to overhaul the EU's deep-sea management regime and to phase out deep-sea bottom trawling and gillnet fishing, proposed by the European Commission on July 19th 2012, is starting to be debated at the European Parliament.



Please quote paper as: “Villasante S, Morato T, Rodriguez-Gonzalez D, Antelo M, Österblom H, Watling L, Nouvian C, Gianni M, Macho G. (2012). Sustainability of deep-sea fish species under the European Union Common Fisheries Policy. Ocean & Coastal Management. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.ocecoaman.2012.07.033>.

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