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The cartoon that could just save the coral and fish of the deep

Charles Clover Published: 8 December 2013



The deep sea has almost no light and very low temperatures. There is no photosynthesis and no plant life but, astonishingly, a lot going on. The number of fish species peaks between 1,600ft and 5,000ft down. There are about 100 species living there of which only three are sought by trawler fleets in British waters: black scabbardfish, grenadier and blue ling.

Fishing for deep-sea fish is fairly new. The Soviet fleet was catching grenadiers on the mid-Atlantic ridge until the 1970s, but gave up when subsidies ended.

French and Spanish trawlers hunting hake and monkfish began to drop heavy weighted trawls onto the slopes of the continental shelf off Britain and Ireland from the late 1980s — long before anyone understood what they were doing. We now know that corals up to 8,500 years old can be destroyed by a single sweep of a trawl.

One of the saddest effects of deep-sea fisheries has been on deep-water sharks, species such as the frilled shark, black dogfish and leafscale gulper shark. These slow-reproducing creatures made an entrance in landings statistics, only to peter out. The three most common deep-water sharks are now endangered or critically endangered — as to the rest, nobody knows.

Scientists have warned constantly that deep-water species are slow-growing, vulnerable and far less numerous than the fish of shallower water. They warned that deep-water trawls had a devastating effect on some fragile underwater habitats. Indeed some likened it to levelling a rainforest to catch a few squirrels. Yet deep-sea trawling has proceeded unseen in the sunless depths — until now.

Between 2002 and 2011 European politicians allowed scientific advice to be exceeded in about 60% of cases when setting quotas for deep-sea species. The fishing nations went on to catch 50% more than they were allowed. It is a story of dire mismanagement even by European standards.

Then two remarkable things happened. Maria Damanaki, the European Union fisheries commissioner and author of this year's overhaul of Europe's fisheries policies, intervened. She proposed a phasing-out of the bottom trawls and bottom-set gillnets associated with the greatest volumes of bycatch and destruction of vulnerable marine ecosystems. Some deep-sea fisheries have more than 40% bycatch of rarer species. She also wanted to make these fisheries record their catches properly. Those who agreed with her held their breath, because a trawling ban is radical indeed.

What has brought such a ban to within an ace of success is the extraordinary campaign against deep-sea fishing run from France, which, with Spain, has been a ruthless exponent of deep-water fisheries, cynically milking tens of millions in subsidies for the deep-water fleets in its west coast ports.

It is also the home of a strand of robust blue environmentalism, from Jacques Cousteau to his worthy successor Claire Nouvian, founder and director of the pressure group Bloom. Nouvian has exposed the extent to which deep-sea fishing is marginal to Europe's fishing economy — no more than 1% of the European catch — and how it would not be economically viable without millions of euros in aid from the EU. Without subsidies and the ability to maximise the price of its low-value fillets through the Intermarché supermarket chain, the fleet of nine or so deep-sea vessels that go out from Brittany would never leave port.

Bloom's message has been simplified brilliantly by the cartoonist Pénélope Bagieu in a strip inviting people to sign a petition to President François Hollande. The cartoon, in French and English, has gone viral, and the petition has already attracted more than 700,000 signatures.

It has transformed the chances of a vote on the deep-sea bottom trawling ban. Amended out of existence in the European parliament's fisheries committee, legislation ordering a ban is now close to returning when the parliament votes in Strasbourg on Tuesday — the same day as Europe's historic fisheries reforms are due to be voted through.

The British fishing industry is aghast at the speed of the popular will. They argue that there are 11 vessels fishing out of Kinlochbervie in the Highlands that would be affected by the proposed trawl ban. They say commercial stocks are returning to within safe biological limits. They say they will keep to an existing "footprint", avoid spawning grounds and record all they catch. What worries them is that a ban on trawling below 2,000ft may be the thin end of the wedge.

What is so important about trawling, you may ask. In the Azores, deep-sea trawling is banned. The Portuguese fish with long lines without damaging habitat. There are new EU subsidies for converting vessels to less destructive gear. The answer comes that trawling is "cultural" in Scotland's fishing communities.

I'm afraid this won't do. If fishermen want the public's money for vessel and fuel subsidies and want to sell their catch, this is a two-way discussion. The public has a right to say how it should be done. It is entirely reasonable to ask that the catching of wild creatures be as selective as possible, respecting the biology of the stocks and their habitat. That principle has been allowed to languish for too long. This week MEPs have another historic chance to set Europe on a new course.

See the cartoon at tinyurl.com/okgbsmb @CRHClover

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