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French deep-sea fisheries: the emperor's clothes syndrome

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Deep-sea fishing in France is a sick and residual activity, which fails to generate profits despite substantial public subsidies.

Such are the findings of a groundbreaking study carried out by the non-profit organization BLOOM thanks to the thorough analysis of all publically available documents concerning deep-sea fishing in France, including the audited accounts of the deep-sea fishing fleets.

The report shows that no more than ten industrial ships are involved in deep-sea fishing today in France. Their catch accounts for 90% of the value of all French deep-sea fish landings.

Furthermore, BLOOM's analysis of fishing companies' audited accounts reveals that they are in chronic deficit, in spite of the substantial aid granted by the European Union and the French government. The two main deep-sea trawling fleets (Scapêche and Euronor) that fish at depths over 1500m in the North-East Atlantic have received several million Euros in public subsidies. This is notably the case of Scapêche, the fleet belonging to the French supermarket chain "Intermarché", which is responsible for more than half of the deep-sea species catch in France, and which has perceived close to 10 million Euros in subsidies for its deep-sea trawlers. These figures do not take into account indirect state aid, such as the taxes on oil, which are waived for fishing companies, and without which the offshore trawlers that use 7000 liters of fuel per day would not be able to leave port.

Consequently, 100% of French citizens are made to contribute financially to a fishing practice that is neither ecologically nor economically sustainable.

In 2010, ICES¹ scientists reiterated that 100% of the European deep-sea catch lied '*outside safe biological limits*'. In fact, certain shark species affected by trawlers, such as the gulper shark *Centrophorus granulosus*, have seen an 80 to 95% population decline and are in critical danger of extinction in the North-East Atlantic.

BLOOM's study reveals that public subsidies have provided financial incentives to unprofitable fishing operations. "*The substantial aid allocated to deep-sea fishing fleets artificially preserves an activity that destroys marine resources and environments*" said Claire Nouvian, president of BLOOM. "*The vast majority of the French deep-sea fishing fleet would probably have disappeared without subsidies*".

Worse still, in the case of Intermarché, subsidies have resulted in the renewal of its deep-sea fleet and, when considering the technological coefficients of its vessels, in an increase of its deep-sea trawlers' fishing capacity. The public monies assigned to this segment of French fishing fleets therefore violate the goals set by the European Union's Common Fisheries Policy (CFP): to 'reduce pressure on fish stocks', 'support the growth of economically viable companies' and 'protect the environment and marine resources'.²

¹ The International Council for the Exploration of the Sea.

²http://europa.eu/legislation_summaries/maritime_affairs_and_fisheries/fisheries_sector_organisation_and_financing/166004_en.htm



“The French situation is akin to the Emperor’s clothes syndrome with no one, whether it be government or French scientists, daring to say out loud that the emperor is naked”, added Claire Nouvian. “It is alarming to think that French officials, who are supposed to protect the common good against private greed, actually choose to defend the interests of essentially two companies, especially those of the retail giant Intermarché...”

Deep-sea fisheries are not just an ecological and economic aberration, they’re also ethically questionable since all the fish caught are destined to industrialized nations.

These findings arrive as negotiations start at the United Nations in New York about the future of deep-sea fisheries on the high seas.

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BLOOM is a non-profit organization, which was founded in 2005 with the aim of protecting the oceans and the socio-economic balances that depend upon them.