

BOOKS

**The fishing industry**

## Heading for the final fillet

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### A bleak outlook for fish stocks

FISH becoming ever more scarce; greed, crime, cruelty, waste, folly, destruction, hypocrisy, ignorance, pusillanimity, deception and the possibility of extinction all becoming ever more abundant. That is the theme of Charles Clover's book about the world fishing industry.

The problem with fishing is as follows. Fish are a wonderful source of protein, not just for the swelling populations of poor countries but, because they are generally better for you than meat, also for health-conscious guzzlers in richer places. As man's appetite for fish has grown, so has his ability to catch them. Modern gadgets—sonars, global positioning system plotters, sea-mapping software, echo sounders, radio beacons, bathymetric generators, "fish aggregation devices" and the like—enable today's vast fishing boats to find and kill their prey as never before.

Although the signs of growing scarcity are everywhere—smaller fish, smaller catches, sometimes no catch at all—most of the efforts to manage fish stocks or control overfishing have failed. When rich or big countries, whether Japan, China or various members of the European Union, exhaust their traditional fisheries, they move on to new ones. With the EU's blessing, European countries—Spain is the most rapacious—buy fishing rights from African states for trifling sums and then set about their predations. They, and others, have also moved on to deplete the stocks in the world's last waters to be exploited—round Antarctica, in the Indian Ocean and in the South Atlantic, just as

they have fished out the stocks in the North Sea, the Mediterranean and the Grand Banks off Canada.

As they exhaust the big fish, they may have to go after smaller and uglier specimens that they used to throw back. They may also have to change the off-putting names of the creatures of the deep to make them more palatable: the Patagonian toothfish shows up on fancy menus as Chilean sea bass. But demand grows and grows, and with it the plunder of the seas.

Though some kinds of fish, such as prawns and salmon, can now be farmed, industrial fishing is still largely a matter of hunting, or, to use Mr Clover's term, mining. "Mining" is apt because commercial fishermen are now hauling fish out much faster than they can be replenished. Everywhere the outlook is bleak. In many places, certain species may never recover.

Umpteen international agencies busy themselves with monitoring, suggesting and complaining, but to little avail. Politicians in rich countries yield spinelessly to the short-term interests of fishermen, who can still tweak the sympathies of other voters in a way that even farmers cannot. And consumers are resolutely uninterested. They may mind about dolphins, or the albatrosses which get snared by the 125km (80-mile) lines sometimes used to catch tuna. Yet the victims of "friendly" practices include many more creatures: whales, turtles, sharks, rainbow runners, dolphin fish, triggerfish, wahoo, billfish, mobula, manta rays, mackerel, barracuda and so on. This "by-catch" is generally flung back into the sea.

The waste is appalling: as much as 85% of the take of Spanish prawn fishermen may be by-catch. The cruelty is equally vile: sea lions and porpoises drowned in nets, dolphins thrown back into the sea with beaks broken and hunks of flesh hacked from their sides, tuna gaffed bloodily, huge manta rays left to gasp their last on deck. The damage is not done only to animals (yes, fish are animals, though self-styled animal-lovers seem far more concerned about foxes, at least in Britain). Trawlers and dredgers wreak destruction across the seabed, crushing entire ecosystems of corals, algae and crustaceans as they go. And, thanks to subsidies and absurdities such as the EU's common fisheries policy, the taxpayer helps to finance this rape.

All this is laid out—like fish on a slab—in Mr Clover's excellent book. Little escapes him as he travels from Tokyo's fish market to Vigo in Spain, from marine reserves in New Zealand to the coast of Mauritania, from Newfoundland to Brussels. He exposes the follies of fishermen, politicians and celebrity chefs, and he ponders the central problem—the age-old "tragedy of the commons", whereby anyone with access to a common resource has an interest in over-exploiting it.

What can be done? In time, farming may help, though most farmed fish must be fed with other fish that have been taken from the sea: sometimes 20 tonnes of dead fish, ground up, is needed for one tonne of live. Tuna farming has proved hugely popular, though it is really fattening: the fish are caught in nets and reared in cages. Moreover, says Mr Clover, it has led to wildly unsustainable catches and, in the eastern Atlantic and the Mediterranean, the collapse of the system for gathering catch information and imposing limits.

To make matters worse, most of the problems of pollution and cruelty associated with farming have yet to be overcome. Salmon—which in the wild swim freely across oceans—are condemned to live lice-ridden and crammed into cages. In Ireland this has brought disease and destruction to local stocks of wild sea trout. Escaped farm fish risk playing genetic havoc with local salmon.

Yet some fishery policies have been shown to work, especially in Iceland. Mr Clover suggests independent management, long-term transferable quotas, marine reserves and, above all, far greater openness, ideally with the help of satellites and the internet, to reveal what every boat is doing. Thus could the public help to police all those who go down to the sea in ships and occupy their business in great waters. His counsel seems eminently wise—and most unlikely to be taken.