



For a man who begins a conversation by saying pessimistic things, Professor Daniel Pauly is remarkably good company.

Not all of the interviews we do for Sealives are prearranged, many are serendipitous. An arrangement is made to be in a certain place at a certain time to meet a particular person, and that kicks off a chain of events that usually includes travel, an interview with our original contact, and others we meet or are introduced to along the way. In fact, staying open and nimble to this stuff is part of the challenge.

A Serendipitous Meeting

On this particular day I met with [Dr. Tony J Pitcher](#) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) and was invited to join the audience at a PhD thesis defense by one of the students at the university's Institute for the Ocean's and Fisheries (IOF), the place where, Pitcher (and Pauly) are based.

This is fascinating stuff—the pursuit of a true understanding of how human activity affects the living ocean by people who are doing it because they truly care. Science-packed and if you want to know what's going on out there, pure gold.

[Dr. Pauly](#) was on the panel at the thesis defense, and he was kind enough to offer me a few minutes of his time.

In so far as a place's like UBC's IOF can have a rockstar professor, Daniel Pauly is surely that. I first heard his name many months before while interviewing [Dhyia Belhabib](#) of Ecotrust Canada. A PhD graduate of IOF herself, she chose UBC as her place to study in part to get the chance to work with Pauly, and with good reason.

Born in France and raised in Switzerland, Pauly completed his doctorate in fisheries biology in Kiel, Germany in 1979 and has focused on fisheries and ocean conservation for his entire career.

Arguably his most influential work has been to lead a team using innovative catch reconstruction techniques to [re-estimate global fishing impacts and trends](#), discovering that catches worldwide may be [as much as 50% higher](#) than reported by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization. A documentary film about this work and its implications entitled [The Missing Catch](#) was aired on Earth Day, April 2017.

In addition, he founded [The Sea Around Us](#)—a large scale research project and web portal supplying detailed fisheries data to anyone who visits the site—supported by the [Pew Charitable Trusts](#) and The [Paul G. Allen Family foundation](#)—and sits on the board of international conservation NGO [Oceana](#). He is also co-founder of [FishBase.org](#)—an online encyclopedia of over 30,000 fish species—and has authored or co-authored [over 1000 publications](#) including books, chapters of books, articles and scientific papers. He has worked in Africa, Asia, Oceania and the Americas, was made a fellow of the Royal Society of Canada in 2016 and has been the recipient of numerous medals and awards including a knighthood from his native France.

As pleased as I was to get the opportunity to talk with Dr. Pauly, my immediate impression was that the interview wasn't going to go well. As a matter of fact, my first impression was that it wasn't going to happen at all.

Pauly began by explaining to me that he had been involved in many media projects and that he held out little hope of any of them having much impact.

This was not what I was hoping for from the great and educated man. It didn't just sound like pessimism, it sounded like futility. Like that most useless of human traits: cynicism.

Further, he criticized Sealives' mission to convey deep knowledge of the ocean from those who live with it, saying "The ones who don't speak, are the fish... the fish, they don't speak."

The Fish Don't Speak

The point he was making is that in all conservation efforts the humans who speak-up for the living planet can never be more than proxy voices for the species under threat.

In purely human tragedies, the victims can speak to us directly about what has been done to them. Speak of their pain, of their loss. This is not so when it comes to tragedies in the animal kingdom. A bluefin tuna never gave first-person testimony on what it is like to be hunted to the edge of extinction.

As pleased as I was to get the opportunity to talk with Dr. Pauly, my immediate impression was that the interview wasn't going to go well. As a matter of fact, my first impression was that it wasn't going to happen at all.

Worse, when humans give their point of view, it is biased in favor of their human interests and cannot be relied upon to be objectively on the side of other species.

The reality is that at best all we can do is speak on behalf of animals and ecosystems or try to convey the future pain that we are likely to suffer as a result of the pressure they feel today. In these cases, the tragedy is either abstract in terms of the experience of a particular species or distant in terms of time and space. At worst, human experience that has so far led us down the path of destruction gets reinforced.

The bulk of messaging on conservation issues is inevitably a call to our higher selves and Pauly is convinced that this is never going to be enough. Human nature, he thinks, will not allow it, and he believes that commercial forces hold too much sway to let change prevail even if it could.

He paints a picture of conflict in multiple directions.

“The societal trend that we have, of the concentration of capital and power into the hands of a few, is deadly for the preservation of natural resources.” He says.

He draws a direct line between our ability to do damage to the environment and the level of difficulty required to harvest from it:

“The perception of fishing that we have in our heads originates from a time when it was a challenge to catch fish. All of this is over. We have monster boats, these monster boats fish at any depth they want, several kilometers deep, and it is this industrial fishing that generates the catches and also the collapses that we have happening throughout the world.”

“The tools, the machinery that we have to throw at fish [are] so powerful that we can fish anywhere [for] anything. We cannot be halted by depth, by distance...” adding “We fish everywhere we want. No fish is secure.”

When I ask him about the viability of an artisanal small boat fishery his response is to reflect on the situation in Canada specifically—“We should have that! That should be the main form of fishing, but if you ask the DFO [The Department of Fisheries and Oceans] they don’t want it. In Canada the concentration of fishing into a few companies is explicit policy, because, they say, it’s easier to manage, more rationalized.”

A Multifaceted Fight

Conflict.

Conflict between sustainability and big business, between conservationists and fishermen, between human nature and what needs to be done, between the way we are comfortable in thinking about our lives and the sheer scale of the problem, and direct conflict between making policy and making progress.

“I could line up hundreds people who think I have done good work and I have changed their mind... you should also try to do everything you can, [but] we have a much bigger problem than most people think.”

It was somewhere around this point that I wondered why the conversation hadn’t dissolved into pleasantries and a polite but firm refusal to be interviewed further.

It wasn’t just my curiosity keeping things going; It was Pauly’s enthusiasm for his subject. His tone had been engaging throughout despite the dark implications of his message— rational, animated, urgent.

His assessment of our ability to change is dire, roundly damning, based upon a long-term in-depth appraisal of the political and social factors involved, and very strongly held. He is talking about nothing less than the failure of democracy to find a way to encourage the populace to express their views on issues that truly make a difference.

But he also asserts “The fact that I am a pessimist about the outcome doesn’t change anything about what I do.”



Professor Daniel Pauly in his office at The Institute for The Oceans and Fisheries, University of British Columbia

This is the heart of Pauly's work. It's only when you start asking him about the available solutions and the power that they possess to generate positive outcomes that it becomes clear where his obvious drive comes from; The moment when I understood why the interview hadn't come to an end.

Solutions Exist

Through a lifetime of work Pauly has seen clear scientific evidence that real solutions are possible, and has a visceral understanding that the opportunity to make use of them is slipping through our fingers.

Ask him if he thinks sustainability is an option and his answer is "Yes."

Ask him if we have to find a way to implement them and his answer is "Yes."

Ask him if the inclusion of environmental protections in policy whose principal goal is to address socio-economic problems and issues of social justice can be an effective mechanism for real change by aligning human incentives with ecological outcomes and he agrees that it is.

“The fact that I am a pessimist about the outcome doesn’t change anything about what I do.”

“What motivates me is precisely the waste that the mess implies.” He tells me. “We are wasting resources we are wasting lives, we are wasting opportunities, by not doing what could be done.”

He mentions the [Stern Review](#)—a comprehensive report on the likely economic impacts of climate change commissioned by the UK government and delivered in 2006; Led by economist Nicholas Stern, the review was and is [an objective account](#) of what climate change was likely to cost in financial terms if we set about fixing it or if we failed to respond. At that time Stern put the price tag of addressing climate change at 1% of GDP annually, today estimates are more like double that, and despite the fact that the benefits of supporting change, including providing stimulus to the renewable energy industry are now closer to hand, governments are still not able to do what is necessary to cut to carbon emissions by a fraction of the amount that the Stern Review envisioned.

The history of climate change science is long, but the effects of emissions on climate and the likelihood of global warming were being stated in clear and unequivocal terms in government reports [during the mid sixties](#). At that time climate change was in Pauly’s words “Something that could have been dealt with... with a few touches... but then it became a political issue, then the big companies said ‘no’... and it became an insurmountable monster.”

The Political Challenge

He relates a story of attending a debate focused on the contribution of the arts, business and science to conservation and the assertion of people present from one West African nation that “We cannot afford conservation in Africa.” and condemns this attitude as both ethically indefensible and a failure to understand the relationship between poverty and conservation.

Pauly has been exploring life in Africa since he first traveled to Ghana in 1971, and for him it is obvious that caring for the living planet and poverty are closely linked, that availability and access to resources are directly connected to issues of the distribution of wealth and opportunity.

To say otherwise he says is “idiotic, demagogic and wrong.”

“It’s because I encounter such organized idiocy, orchestrated idiocy, that I persist.”

He’s saying that we must resist the temptation to dismiss the link between people’s wellbeing and the fate of the natural world.

Further, that we must tackle the fact that the way human life currently works is at odds with the goals we need to adopt for a truly sustainable existence. The political challenge must address the human challenge; the thing that is built into us.

“Because every one of our units, the enterprise, the family, the group, the civic association, the NGO, every human or social organization wants to grow... what social force is there that is braking [applying the brakes] saying ‘we have enough’. There is no such social force. None.”

In the context of a discussion on a favorite book on ecological issues he says “Even the author who says ‘we should satisfy ourselves with less’, even that person wants to sell more books.”

“That is the absence of balance, [the balancing force] that will work against this enormous machine that we have.”

“What social force is there that breaks the system?”

Forcing the Doors of Change

While some people have an abiding faith in human nature and despair that solutions elude us, Pauly is the reverse. He is painfully aware that solutions exist but despairs of humankind’s ability to welcome them, to come to grips with how urgently they are needed, to make their implementation a priority.

“It’s because I encounter such organized idiocy, orchestrated idiocy, that I persist.”

The message is that solutions elude us not because of what happens out there, in the multi-hued waters of our nations’ EEZs or in the yet to be governed High-Seas, but because of what takes place in our own minds, and in the way that change propagates, or fails to propagate through society.

Pauly’s view is that most people, in a situation where genuine change at a personal level and massive change at a societal level are both required, have little desire and next-to-no incentive to do the first and even less power to bring about the latter. But it’s not just hand-wringing, it’s a call to action. A call to action to do not just the small things many of us do in our own lives but to demand change at a systemic level.

It has taken an entire generation for an effective majority of people to accept that global warming even exists, and a second to begin experimenting with the kind of changes that reversing it requires. If it takes a third to actually implement the solutions at scale it will be too late.

Daniel Pauly is asking us to find a better way for the impacts felt by the fish and other species, and all of life, to be heard in a way that the message is not so abstract, in a way that actually gets taken-up by our political system.

And just maybe he is asking us to come together to cause whatever it is that disrupts the current system, confident that solutions do exist.

Link: <http://sealives.org/forcing-the-doors-of-change-what-true-conservation-requires-of-us-all/>