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Big ocean fish decline dramatic

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WASHINGTON -- Commercial fishing has emptied the world's oceans of 90 percent of the populations of large prized tuna, swordfish, marlin and other fish species that flourished a half-century ago, two marine scientists reported.

The new research based on nearly 50 years of data offers a bleak outlook for some of the most commercially valuable trophy fish species and further debunks a notion that oceans are limitless blue frontiers teeming with boundless life.

'Although it is now widely accepted that single populations can be fished to low levels, this is the first analysis to show general, pronounced declines of entire communities across widely varying ecosystems,' scientists Ransom Myers and Boris Worm report in today's issue of Nature magazine. 'Most scientists and managers may not be aware of the true magnitude of change in marine ecosystems.'

Myers, a marine biology professor at Dalhousie University in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and Dalhousie research fellow Worm found it generally takes less than 15 years for giant commercial fishing operations to kill 80 percent of a new fishing ground's abundance.

They also found marine life can recover from such commercial operations if smaller, fast-growing species are given a chance to fill in for the overfished predators, whose average weights also are declining sharply.

'This study carries significant weight,' said Ellen Peel, president of The Billfish Foundation, a Fort Lauderdale-based non-profit conservation group that works to protect marlin. 'It looks at many oceanic regions over many decades.'

'The study provides the most comprehensive baseline to date against which fisheries managers must lay out a road map for recovery of many species. Now the big question is, will they ignore the study or use it as a measuring point?'

Myers began work on the report a decade ago, collecting data only for commercial fish that could be put into cans.

The data cover Japanese fishing between 1952 and 1999 for the most widespread type of fishing gear -- longlines -- used on the open oceans to catch tuna, marlin and swordfish. Longlines float for miles with baited hooks dangling vertically below, causing lots of other unintended catches.

Blue marlin and white marlin are among the bycatch species hooked by longlines, Peel said.

'In the Atlantic alone, over 95 percent of the mortality of white marlin and blue marlin comes on the hooks of foreign longline boats,' Peel said.

'Our biggest challenge is, how do you get other countries to restrict their methods so that their targeted catch and bycatch can both remain at sustainable levels.'

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Just after World II, as large-scale fishing fleets began spreading globally, no marine fish stocks were known to be overfished and the Japanese caught 10 fish per 100 hooks.

Now, they are lucky to catch one per 100, Myers said. The report uses other research to verify the results and expand them to other species.

One recent success story is the rebuilding of North Atlantic swordfish populations to 94 percent of what they should be, up from 65 percent, because of stricter management since 1999, according to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas.

Daniel Pauly, a leading fisheries expert based in Canada, said the report is significant, however, for its unusually comprehensive data illustrating the shortcomings of fisheries management.

'We always regulate the closing of barns after the horses have already left,' he said. 'What it means is that the high seas fisheries that are opened up in the deep seas, they are a completely law-free environment like the Old West.' HITTING HOME

Off Northeast Florida, marlin and swordfish are popular gamefish among anglers. But recreational fishing pressure on marlin and swords is minimal because of the distance boats must run to the Gulf Stream to pursue them.

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