



Ecology Action Centre



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NAFO stalls on protecting the high seas from bottom trawling

At its 30th Annual Meeting held in Vigo, Spain this past week, the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization (NAFO) addressed several issues important to long-term conservation of the marine environment, but failed to agree to protect areas of the deep-sea which scientists had identified as vulnerable to the impact of bottom fishing.

The United Nations General Assembly (UN GA), in 2006, called on regional fisheries management organizations such as NAFO to establish regulations by 31 December 2008 to prevent damage to corals, sponges, seamounts and other vulnerable deep-sea marine habitats from bottom fishing on the high seas. Among other measures, the UN GA called for closures of all areas to bottom fishing where vulnerable marine ecosystems are “known or likely” to occur unless regulations are in place prevent damage. NAFO did agree this week to partially close two additional seamount areas, although exploratory fishing is still allowed in 20% of these seamount areas.

However, NAFO failed to close six areas of the deep-sea identified by scientists as containing high concentrations of corals and other vulnerable species. Nor did NAFO agree to any regulations to prevent damage from continued bottom trawling in these areas, in spite of the UN GA mandate to do so.

NAFO did adopt an ‘encounter’ protocol the requires fishing vessels to move 2 nautical miles from an areas where when they accidentally catch corals and sponges, but only if they catch more than 100 kilograms of coral or 1000 kilograms of sponges, quantities far higher than those recommended by NAFO’s own working group of fisheries scientists and managers.

“These long lived, deep seas species deserve far greater protection” said Susanna Fuller of the Halifax based Ecology Action Centre. “NAFO countries have yet to deliver on the commitments they made at the UN in 2006, and agreed to at an Extraordinary Meeting of NAFO earlier this year”.

Spain has the largest deep sea trawl fleet fishing in the NAFO area. The Spanish fishing industry has often argued that in historically fished areas, where trawling has already occurred, corals have already been destroyed and there is no point in closing any of these areas to bottom trawling because the corals are gone.

“NAFO scientists made some good progress this past year in mapping areas where there are corals and sponges and seamounts, using up to date scientific information, “ says Jennifer Ford, also of the Ecology Action Centre. “Yet when it comes to meaningful protection, there is resistance to closing areas anywhere where fishing has occurred over the past 20 years. If anything, it is urgent to protect what corals remain in order to prevent the complete destruction

of these ecosystems.”

“It seems fairly clear that NAFO is not going to meet the UN deadline although if there were a genuine will to do so, they could still meet again at the end of this year or early next year to put meaningful regulations in place before the 2009 fishing season,” said Matthew Gianni of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition.

“NAFO is making progress in shifting its approach to regulating deep-sea fisheries and deep sea habitats certainly in terms of procedures,” said Susanna Fuller, “But the real shift will be when fishing nations realize that not everywhere is going to be open to fishing, and some areas will have to be closed to destructive fishing gear forever.”

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Background Information

The United Nations General Assembly Resolution 61/105 adopted in December 2006 calls on regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs) to:

- Assess whether individual bottom fishing activities would have significant adverse impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems (VMEs) such as cold-water corals, seamounts and hydrothermal vents and, if so, manage such fishing to prevent such impacts or prohibit bottom fishing;
- Identify the locations of VMEs and determine whether bottom fishing would cause significant adverse impacts to either the VMEs or the long term sustainability of deep sea fish stocks;
- Close areas to bottom fishing where VMEs are known or likely to occur, based on the best available scientific information, and not allow such fishing to proceed unless conservation and management measures are in place to prevent significant adverse impacts on VMEs;
- Cease bottom fishing if a VME is encountered during the course of fishing operations and report the location so that appropriate measures can be adopted in respect of the relevant site.

The resolutions calls on RFMOs to “adopt and implement” these measures by December 31, 2008.

UNEP 2004 - Friewald, A., Fosså, J.H., Koslow, T., Roberts, J.M. 2004. *Cold-water coral reefs*. UNEP-WCMC, Cambridge, UK.

“Active gear that comes into contact with the sea floor is considered the greatest threat to cold-water coral reefs and includes bottom trawls, dredges, bottom-set gillnets, bottom-set longlines, and pots and traps...Due to their widespread use, bottom trawls have the largest disruptive impact of any fishing gear on the seabed in general and especially on coral ecosystems” (Pages 37 & 38)

