

Sea Emergency: Climate Change, Trade Subsidies, Small Fisheries

LAST June, UN Secretary-General António Guterres stood before more than 6,000 delegates from 150 nations in Lisbon to open the second UN Oceans Conference. “Sadly,” he lamented, “we have taken the ocean for granted and today we face what I would call an ocean emergency.” There have been some positive developments: more nations declaring coastal marine protected areas, and a few successes in promoting sustainable fishing regimes. But overall the trends are alarming.

More than a third of all wild ocean fish stocks are overharvested—a proportion that has increased over past decades—and much of the remainder

is close to the limits of biological sustainability. Perverse financial incentives and regulatory failures are depleting world fisheries further. Plastic pollution is a global crisis.

The president of Palau, representing Pacific small island states, warned that by 2050 the weight of plastic in the seas will exceed the biomass of all the fish in the ocean.

Climate change is increasing acidification of the oceans, deoxygenation of marine waters, and the impoverishment of marine biodiversity. It is accelerating the world-wide death of coral reefs, as well as the disruption of other critical marine ecosystems such as the coastal spawning grounds of numerous species. The interrelated dynamics of these changes include the warming of ocean waters, the increased absorption of CO₂ (forming carbonic acid when dissolved in water), and rising sea levels inundating mangroves and other biologically critical areas. Many nations have fallen short in implementing national commitments under the UN 2015 Paris climate agreement to reduce carbon emissions and to provide financial support for climate mitigation.

The Oceans Conference illumi-

nated not just the interconnectedness of global environmental crises, but also the links of the ocean emergency to perverse incentives embedded in the world political economy. The financial subsidization of the construction and operation of fleets by the world’s major fishing nations has been for decades the single most important driver of overfishing. Too many subsidized trawlers are chasing too few fish.

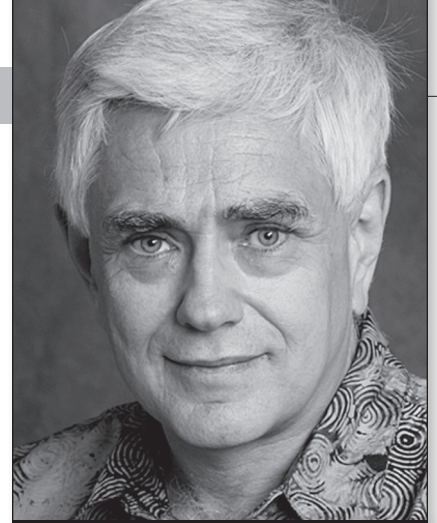
Subsidies to increase, modernize, and operate fishing fleets account for over \$22 billion of the estimated \$35 billion of these subventions, and some 80 percent goes to large fishing concerns, enabling activities that otherwise

would not be profitable. According to a 2018 paper published by researchers at the University of British Columbia and the University of California at Santa Barbara,

without “large government subsidies . . . 54 percent of the present high-seas fishing grounds would be unprofitable.” A form of de facto subsidization involves extremely low wages paid to fish workers in the fleets of some countries, and even the use of forced labor on trawlers.

Days before the Lisbon Oceans Conference, 166 nations in the World Trade Organization finally agreed to reduce some subsidies supporting illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, and financial support for harvesting depleted fish populations. But the much larger government aid for capital and operating costs (including fossil fuel subsidies) remains. A French environmental organization summarized the WTO slight of hand: “They closed subsidies for overfished stocks but not for overfishing.”

Many sessions at the Lisbon Conference urged greater support for sustainable management of community-based, small-scale fisheries. SSFs



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account for over half of the wild fish sold directly for human consumption. Of the 120 million people working in fisheries world-wide, 90 percent are in SSFs. In July, a UN report on the “Sustainable Use of Wild Species,” in preparation for four years by 85 experts from 33 countries, released its summary conclusion. It emphasized two recommendations for fisheries: ending subsidies and providing more support to build up sustainable management of SSFs.

In 2014, the UN Food and Agriculture Organization issued guidelines for sustainable management of SSFs. Subsequently the Ocean Program of the Environmental Law Institute completed a “Law and Governance Toolkit” to help implement the FAO guidelines at the local level. ELI is already working to promote the use of the toolkit by governments in the Pacific through the regional Pacific Community organization of nations, and through partnerships with fishing communities in Mozambique and South Africa.

Helping SSFs addresses both the environmental and social equity objectives of the UN Sustainable Development Goal 14, “to conserve and sustainably use the ocean seas and marine environment for sustainable development.” UN Secretary-General Guterres cited SDG 14 as a *raison d’être* of the Lisbon Conference, and he deplored that it is the most underfunded of all the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

By 2050, plastic trash in the oceans will exceed the biomass of the global fish stock