



News Front Page



Africa
Americas
Asia-Pacific
Europe
Middle East
South Asia
UK
England
Northern Ireland
Scotland
Wales
Politics
Education
Magazine
Business
Health
Science/Nature
Technology
Entertainment

Have Your Say
In Pictures
Week at a Glance
Country Profiles
In Depth
Programmes

BBC SPORT

BBC WEATHER

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Last Updated: Thursday, 1 July, 2004, 12:43 GMT 13:43 UK

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Deep sea fish stocks 'in crisis'

Over-fishing in the north Atlantic is seriously damaging fish stocks, which are being "mined" at over twice the recommended rate, say conservationists.

Fishing vessels currently catch stocks of blue whiting to feed farmed salmon.

The North East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, which fixed the last quota for blue whiting at 650,000 tons, says fishermen caught 2.3m tons in 2003.

Stocks of the fish will cease to be sustainable if current practices continue, says conservation body WWF.

Blue whiting, a deep sea relative of cod, tend to be caught in international waters, from north Africa to the Barents Sea.

Dispute

The majority of fish caught are used as fishmeal, with a small number being caught for human consumption.

A precautionary fishing quota of 650,000 tons was set in 1994, but the system broke down in 2000.

Since then a diplomatic dispute between the EU, Norway and Iceland has prevented a new limit being set.

In the absence of a regulatory system, the number of blue whiting caught in a year swelled to over 2 million in 2003, according to figures from the commission.



Norway is embroiled in a diplomatic row with the EU and Iceland

“ Stocks are being reduced at such a rate that it will soon cease to be commercially viable to try to catch the fish ”

Kjartan Hoydal
East Atlantic Fisheries Commission

Experts say current practices will cause the fish stock to become unsustainable as there will soon be too few fish left for fisherman to catch.

Kjartan Hoydal, secretary of the East Atlantic Fisheries Commission, told BBC News Online: "A quota needs to be agreed so that the current system comes to an end.

"Stocks are being reduced at such a rate that it will soon cease to be commercially viable to try to catch the fish."

And WWF - formerly known as the World Wildlife Fund - is calling for the sale of blue whiting as fishmeal to stop.

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Louise Heaps, of WWF, said: "At the moment stocks are being 'mined' in a way that is tantamount to a free-for-all and it is having a significant impact.

"We feel very strongly that blue whiting should not be used as fish food at all until it is properly managed".

Threat

The countries involved in the diplomatic row will meet in Brussels in July in a bid to establish a quota.

Current practices have also been condemned by Greenpeace.

A spokesman for the conservation group said:
"Destructive and unsustainable fishing represents the greatest threat to our ocean ecosystems.

"Deep sea ecosystems are particularly vulnerable because they are often made up of slow-growing species which cannot withstand commercial fishing pressure."

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