

November 17, 2004

Unsustainable fishing has a price

In spite of recent scares about BSE and avian flu, those of us living in developed countries have it pretty easy when it comes to meat. Most of us never have to think about where it comes from or how it gets into those sparkling clean shrink-wrapped packages in the store coolers.

But all of our food choices have consequences, especially meat - which includes fish. And a new report published in the journal *Science* shows just how connected those choices are to nature and even to people in far away lands.

In Africa, the bushmeat trade is one of the biggest threats to many species, including some of our closest primate cousins. In some areas, overhunting is driving a number of creatures to the brink of extinction. This may seem to be a problem distant to the developed world, but when group of researchers, including two from the University of British Columbia, examined the cause of increases in Ghana's bushmeat trade, they found a strong link to the European fishing industry.

It seems that the European Union has been steadily increasing its presence of fishing boats along the coast of West Africa since 1950. In fact, today's E.U. fleet catches 20 times more fish in this area now than it did back then. This overfishing has driven up local fish prices and decreased local fish availability in an area that traditionally depends on the sea for protein. As a result, locals have turned to bushmeat for sustenance.

By comparing fish harvesting data to changes in the estimated biomass (weight of living creatures) of large mammals in Ghana, researchers were able to track the relationship between the two resources over a 30-year period. They found that years with poor fish harvests for locals coincided with large drops in mammal biomass and vice versa. This correlation was further substantiated by annual counts of hunters found in nature reserves.

Overall, between 1970 and 1998, the biomass of 41 large mammals in Ghana's nature reserves dropped by 76 per cent, and up to 45 per cent of those species became locally extinct. Making the situation even worse, the biomass of fish stocks in the region has also dropped by 50 per cent and some stocks face imminent collapse.

This is a recipe for an unsustainable food system. The E.U. supports its West African fishery to the tune of \$350 million U.S. per year - up from just \$6 million in 1981. So in this case, wealthy countries are subsidizing an industry that is degrading the resources of a region that cannot afford to lose them - all to provide exotic fish for restaurants in places like Paris and London.

Canadians aren't off the hook either. In Canada, the government-supported salmon farming industry often talks about the capacity for growth and displays charts showing how much money there is to be made and how many jobs created and how great it all is. But what's missing from those charts is the fact that salmon eat other fish. Right now, those fish are also coming from all over the world - especially from developing countries in South America. And since it takes two to four kilograms of wild fish to produce a kilogram of farmed salmon, it doesn't take a genius to surmise that, as currently practiced, this is not a sustainable industry.

Producing enough food to feed the planet's growing population is a huge problem. But continuing to prop up unsustainable food systems only exacerbates the problem or pushes it onto countries that cannot afford to lose what little resources they have. It's time to start thinking about where our meat actually comes from and who's really paying for it.

SPECIAL READER ALERT

Don't miss CBC's one-hour special **documentary on David Suzuki** as part of its "Greatest Canadian" series **on November 17th at 8pm local time**. Rock musician Melissa Auf der Maur, who played with Hole, Smashing Pumpkins, and recently released a solo album will be taking the microphone for David Suzuki, explaining why she thinks he's the Greatest Canadian.

Outside Links

Take the Nature Challenge and learn more at

- DavidSuzuki.org

If you agree with Melissa and want to support David Suzuki's lifetime of hard work, vote for him after the show by phone or [here](#).

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