

Gaps and Assumptions in Fisheries Management

By Helen Forsey

The following letter by *Changing Course's* Helen Forsey was published in the February 2022, issue of *The Navigator*.

Dear Editor,

The *Navigator* managing editor's overview of the Oceana Fishery Audit in the January issue was welcome and invites comment.

I agree with the Audit's assessment that the Department of Fisheries and Oceans' (DFO) management of our fisheries leaves much to be desired, and I support Oceana's goal of improving it. However, I would challenge certain basic elements of its approach that reflect the same mistaken assumptions that DFO's management itself is shaped by.

First, "rebuilding" fish stocks is a problematic concept. Computer models, targets and timelines do not make rebuilding happen, and putting them into a "plan" is just playing to our delusion that we are in control. We humans cannot rebuild nature, let alone plan it. What we *can* do is allow nature to rebuild itself, and support that process.

Part of that support will certainly involve applying both good fisheries science and Indigenous knowledge, and it will definitely require a genuine ecosystem approach. The ocean is not a farm and fish do not live in separate species-defined silos. Some of four problems come from treating them as if they do.

As part of our marine ecosystems, human harvesters play a role as apex predators, but large-scale industrial fishing has distorted that role into something that is too often destructive. If we focus our fishery policies on managing effort – the who, how, when and where of catching fish – then we can limit or eliminate those destructive practices and enable sustainable harvests.

Another problem with the current output-control approach (quota-based management) is the assumption that we can count or measure the amount of fish in the sea. But we can't. All efforts to do so have massive margins of error in their results. The vulnerability of all marine life to climate change only magnifies these uncertainties, making computer models and targets based on past estimates even less applicable.

What we can and should measure is what gets caught, including bycatch, most of which occurs in the large-scale fisheries. Instead of trying to micro-manage the so-called "recreational" food fishery with its miniscule proportion of the harvest, we need to focus on countering the waste and damage done to our fisheries and our marine environment by big industrial players.

The gaps in Canada's marine fisheries management might be reframed as the gap between a new approach based on ecosystem realities, Indigenous wisdom and effort controls, and the current computer-modelled, quota-based approach that has shown itself time and again to be destined to fail.

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