

UN General Assembly calls for action on bottom trawling; conservation organisations pledge: we will be watching!

8 December 2006 - New York. The UN General Assembly (UNGA) concluded its annual debate on Oceans and Sustainable Fisheries today.

At the close of the debate, the UNGA formally adopted two Resolutions, one of which included controversial measures for high seas bottom trawling. A number of countries as well as conservation organisations expressed disappointment that the UN General Assembly has failed to adopt a moratorium on this devastating practice, particularly in the unregulated areas of the high seas. The negotiations were widely criticised for their lack of transparency and the ability of a few countries to undermine stronger measures favoured by the majority.

Despite this, many states nonetheless agreed that an important first step had been taken. The 16 Pacific Island States, which had supported a full moratorium, stated that: "This year's resolution goes much further than that of 2004, as it clearly sets the standard for the management of bottom fishing activities and their impact on vulnerable marine ecosystems. ...We urge flag states in particular to ensure that their vessels and nationals fish responsibly and in accordance with conservation and management measures, including those in paragraph 86 of this year's resolution."

Australia said: "Australia is disappointed, however, that the resolution does not contain a prohibition on bottom trawling in unmanaged high seas areas. Such a ban would have been an effective incentive for the establishment of competent and modern RFMOs [Regional Fisheries Management Organisations], while providing protection for vulnerable marine ecosystems in the absence of such regulation. The challenge now is to ensure that the measures we adopt today are implemented fully, effectively and as a matter of priority. The resolution contains deadlines for the implementation of these measures. We would like to stress that a deadline is no reason to delay, especially given the call in 2004 for urgent action."

The European Union, which includes Spain - the country with the largest high seas bottom trawl fleet in the world - expressed similar disappointment that a stronger resolution was not adopted and called on all States and RFMOs "to assume that fishing that has adverse impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems must be tightly regulated to prevent such impacts, or prohibited when prevention is not possible."

Matthew Gianni, Policy Advisor to the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC), an alliance of over 60 environmental and conservation organizations from around the world commented, "Although the Sustainable Fisheries Resolution adopted today falls well short of the moratorium on high seas bottom trawling advocated by many countries and the DSCC, it does contain far reaching measures which, if fully implemented, could bring an end to the wholesale destruction of fragile deep sea ecosystems on the high seas by bottom trawl fishing over the next one to two years. This, however, is a big if but we hope that statements made today signal a clear commitment by high seas fishing nations to effectively regulate their deep-sea fishing fleets."

Representing a significant advance in the approach to oceans management, the Resolution calls on fisheries management organizations to close areas of the high seas to bottom fishing where cold-water corals and other vulnerable deep-sea species are known or likely to occur. The resolution also calls on fishing nations to only allow their fleets to engage in deep-sea fishing on the high seas in areas where they are certain that no damage will be done to vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems.

But it is in the unregulated areas of the high seas where no fisheries management organizations exist that the resolution falls short, leaving it to the discretion of flag States to regulate their vessels and implement the resolution.

Lisa Speer of the NRDC, a member of the Coalition said, "The UN General Assembly debate over the destructive impact of high seas bottom trawling has galvanized public concern over the need to protect the deep ocean. This debate will not end today with the adoption of this Resolution" but will continue to play out over the coming years in a wide range of international fora. "

"The small group of fishing nations that have dominated discussions on fisheries and oceans for the past 50 years have been put on notice that business as usual is simply not acceptable. The majority of States now recognise that a sea-change is necessary if we are going to have healthy oceans and fish populations in the future. States are making commitments today that they have avoided making for years. And we will be watching and documenting their actions to make sure they follow through on their pledges," said Karen Sack of Greenpeace.

The United States could become one of the first states to act on its UN commitment. The US Senate has just passed legislation that would require the United States to impose trade measures on nations whose fishing vessels adversely affect vulnerable deep-sea life in unregulated high seas areas. Passage is expected shortly in the US House of Representatives. If both Houses pass the legislation, President Bush is expected to sign it into law.

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