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Arctic Corals and Sponges Need Widescale Protection From Trawl Impacts

Canada's Arctic is home to ecologically important cold water coral forests and sponge beds, but these unique and sensitive ecosystems are increasingly exposed to the destructive impacts of bottom trawling, as ice melts and fishing activities expand. Conservation groups across Canada are calling for much needed regulation and habitat protection provisions that will ensure these critical species are protected.

Recognizing the impact of bottom trawling gear on these fragile ecosystems, the fishing industry has proposed a voluntary closure in an area that is currently not heavily fished. "This is a small step in the right direction, and it is encouraging to see the industry take initiative," says Julie Huntington of the Newfoundland Coalition for Healthy Oceans, "but much, much more is needed."

The voluntary closure in NAFO Area OB announced by the offshore fishing industry last week is a step forward, in that it recognizes that there is a problem with fisheries impacts on deep-sea corals, and that fisheries closures will be required to address the problem.

"The recognition that bottom trawling has impacts is a positive step forward, but beyond that, the voluntary closure does not change anything: nobody fishes there anyway," says Dr. Evan Edinger, of Memorial University. "The bottom is too rough in this area and their nets get torn up." Dr. Edinger and his students have been studying Newfoundland's cold water corals. "To make the Hudson Strait closure a meaningful measure for coral conservation, the closed area needs to be enlarged considerably, especially to include the diverse and abundant corals on the northern tip of Saglek Bank, which have been documented in both scientific surveys and fisheries observer data."

"The proposed voluntary closure does nothing to protect ecologically important and highly vulnerable sponges in the Davis Strait from damage by the Greenland halibut trawl fishery," according to Dalhousie University graduate student Susanna Fuller, who is also Marine Conservation Coordinator at the Halifax based Ecology Action Centre.

"Voluntary bottom trawl closures in B.C. did nothing to protect our globally unique glass sponge reefs," says Jennifer Lash of Living Oceans Society. "Fishermen actually increased their efforts in the reefs during the time of the voluntary closures, perhaps out of a fear that mandatory closures would soon be put in place."

While Canada is opening up new areas to bottom trawling, a recent international agreement reached last week, which Canada supported, declares the high seas of the South Pacific off limits to expanding trawl fisheries into new areas. Furthermore, existing high seas bottom trawling in the region will be phased out by October of this year, unless or until the druggers conduct environmental impact assessments and can ensure that they can prevent damage to corals, sponges and other sensitive seabed species.

Bill Wareham, of the David Suzuki Foundation says, "What is amazing is that the fishing industry has recognized the need to do something, while the Department of Fisheries and Oceans has known about the impacts of fishing on coral and sponges and about

expanding fisheries into the Arctic for over a decade – and has done nothing to protect this fragile area.”

“Canada is known for its wilderness,” says Sabine Jessen, Executive Director of the Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society,” but when it comes to protecting our marine wilderness areas, we fall far behind other countries.”

In the United States, as part of a response to marine conservation concerns in Alaska in 2005, the National Marine Fisheries Services stated that "taking proactive measures to restrict the mobile bottom tending gear footprint on a regional basis may be the best way to comprehensively protect deep sea coral and sponge essential fish habitat and to prevent deep sea coral and sponge bycatch, while minimizing adverse economic impacts on the fishing industry."

This approach to "freezing the footprint" has been implemented by other major fishing nations, yet Canada has failed to take such proactive measures, despite being fully aware of the impacts on coral and sponge communities. Conservation groups call for a similar approach to that implemented in Alaska, where 900,000 km² are closed to bottom tending gear, and considerations are being given in the Eastern Bering Sea, to only allow trawling in specific areas.

“Canada must begin to catch up to other countries,” says Gretchen Fitzgerald of the Sierra Club. “It doesn’t make us look good on the international scene. Even New Zealand has closed 30% of its national waters to trawling”.

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Cold water sponges, corals and associated fauna caught as bycatch in Arctic trawl survey, fall 2006.



Cold water corals, *Primnoa* and *Paragorgia* caught as bycatch in Arctic trawl survey, fall 2006.



Cold water sponges caught in redfish fishery off Greenland in the early 1990's.