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ECOLOGY ACTION CENTRE, GREENPEACE, LIVING OCEANS SOCIETY,
NEWFOUNDLAND & LABRADOR COALITION FOR HEALTHY OCEANS, SIERRA
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U.N. RECOGNIZES THE IMPACTS OF BOTTOM- TRAWLING BUT FAILS TO AGREE ON HIGH SEAS MORATORIUM

November 23, 2006

Negotiations on a U.N. resolution, which was hoped to have included an interim prohibition on high seas bottom-trawling in unregulated areas, ended late last night with little progress in protecting vulnerable marine ecosystems.

“We are very disappointed in the final outcome”, says Susanna Fuller, who has been monitoring the negotiations on behalf of Canadian environmental organizations. “Although there was considerable support for a real shift in how we manage fisheries on the high seas, it is unfortunate that in the end, the final language ensures that the destruction of bottom-trawling on 64% of the high seas will continue unabated”.

States agreed on measures that would require assessment of the impacts of bottom-trawling on vulnerable marine ecosystems including a call to cease fisheries that were found to impact such systems in regulated areas of the high seas.

Although Australia, the U.S., and the majority of countries were pushing for a temporary moratorium on bottom-trawling, in the end Iceland’s refusal to agree to text on ‘freezing the footprint’ in unregulated areas effectively ended the move towards a change in international fisheries management. “This weak resolution includes responsibilities that are already part of international law,” says Jennifer Lash of Living Oceans Society. “An interim prohibition would have been much more effective and would have ensured that flag States were accountable, before allowing fishing.”

“The global governance system has failed to move past the stage of denial and recognize that we have a serious problem with destructive fishing practices on the high seas” says Bill Wareham, Acting Director of the Marine Conservation Program at the David Suzuki Foundation. “It is a tragedy that destructive practices are being allowed to continue today after days of talk by world leaders about high seas fishing reform. If the world cannot depend on the U.N. to mandate the means of protecting fish habitat and preventing the ongoing decline of high seas fish stocks then we are in a very sad state”.

“This outcome leaves states whose waters are adjacent to unregulated areas totally vulnerable to the negative impacts of bottom-trawling” says Julie Huntington of the Newfoundland & Labrador Coalition for Healthy Oceans.

Although all but Iceland were prepared to compromise in the end, in the weeks leading up to negotiations, a handful of countries, including Canada, Spain, and Iceland, had opposed proposals for a comprehensive global moratorium.

“We recognize that under immense international pressure, Canada was willing to compromise” says Mark Butler of the Ecology Action Centre. “However, it has become apparent we must change the way we develop fisheries policy in Canada – the interests of one sector of the fishing industry, the dragger companies, can’t be allowed to trump the science, other sectors of the industry, and national consensus”.

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Contact:

Susanna Fuller, Ecology Action Centre (902) 830-8994

Jennifer Lash, Living Oceans Society (250) 741-4006

Mark Butler, Ecology Action Centre (902) 429-5287

Bill Wareham, David Suzuki Foundation (604) 740-4318

Bruce Cox, Greenpeace Canada (416) 419-7341

Julie Huntington, Newfoundland & Labrador Coalition for Healthy Oceans
(709) 895-0853

Laura Hussey, Canadian Parks and Wilderness Society (902) 446-4155

Gretchen Fitzgerald, Sierra Club of Canada (902) 494-2146

PRESS RELEASE

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE:

23 November 2006

EFFECTIVE ACTION ON BOTTOM TRAWLING SCUTTLED IN THE FINAL HOURS OF NEGOTIATIONS

Iceland blocks consensus for swift action to curtail the destruction of high seas ecosystems at the United Nations in New York.

UN fisheries negotiations ran into early this morning as delegates worked to find a compromise. They were looking at text which would have offered immediate protection for vulnerable areas in the absence of agreement on a global moratorium on high seas bottom trawling. Even this compromise was derailed by Iceland.

Kelly Rigg of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) said, "The majority of the world's governments fought hard to protect the biodiversity of the deep oceans from high seas bottom trawling. That tidal wave of change will not be held back for long."

Lisa Speer of the Natural Resources Defense Council (a member of the DSCC who attended the negotiations) said: "We are deeply disappointed that a broad consensus for protecting the world's oceans was thwarted by Iceland and a handful of recalcitrant fishing nations. In contrast, Australia, the US, the UK, Norway, Palau and other Pacific Island States, Brazil, New Zealand, and many others deserve enormous credit for their efforts to stop unregulated destruction of high seas fisheries and habitats. It is now up to consumers, seafood purveyors and conservationists around the world to vote with their wallets. That will send a clear message to the ocean plunderers that their days are numbered."

Although deeply disappointed that a moratorium was torpedoed by a few rogue states, the DSCC pointed to the seismic shift which is occurring in the politics of high seas fisheries management, in no small part due to the high seas bottom trawling campaign.

"For the first time, the UN has seriously looked into how to protect marine life across the international waters of the high seas. Regional fishing bodies have been served notice that they must stop managing individual fish stocks, start looking at the ecosystem as a whole and take precautionary measures" said Kelly Rigg, DSCC Coordinator.

Karen Sack of DSCC member Greenpeace International, pointed to the handful of countries which blocked proposals for a more comprehensive global moratorium. These included Iceland, Japan, Canada, South Korea, Russia and Spain. In the end, all but Iceland were prepared to compromise. She said, "regardless of the actions of Iceland, there is a clear and demonstrable will by most states to manage the global commons differently for the good of the planet rather than just for the benefit of a few distant water fishing fleets. This isn't the end of the story – it's just the beginning. Proposals on the table for no-take zones, marine protected areas, reform of Regional Fisheries Management Organizations and the elimination of destructive fishing practices, will ensure that these voices continue to be heard."

The text is part of a broader resolution on sustainable fisheries, which will be formally adopted by the UN General Assembly on December 7th during its annual 'debate' on oceans. The DSCC is calling on States to use that opportunity to announce what they will do in the absence of a consensus agreement on strong measures.

Kelly Rigg: "The support of the global public, the scientific community and the growing membership of the DSCC have all contributed to an overwhelming call to put the interests of the few aside, in favour of protecting the global commons. On behalf of the DSCC I would like to thank them, and the Ministers who listened to them, for working to save the deep seas."

The DSCC is a coalition of more than 60 environmental and conservation organisations worldwide.

www.savethehighseas.org

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The final text of the resolution is not yet available. Once it is, the DSCC will respond in greater detail to the position which the UN General Assembly is being asked to take on December 7th.

For further information please contact:

Mirella von Lindenfels	+ 447717 844 352 (London)
Kelly Rigg	+ 31 621 296 917 (Amsterdam)
Karen Sack	+1202 4155403 (New York)
Lisa Speer	+1 (203) 249-0906 (New York)