

Baltic, Bering and Okhotsk Seas

More hard currency, fewer fish

Even as the Russian seas get increasingly depleted of fish stocks, official indifference continues

More and more Russians are wondering why their stores do not stock enough of pollock, cod and the other fish they so relish. The reason is plain. Overfishing in Russian seas has depleted stocks and most of what is caught goes to markets overseas.

But the all-important Committee for Fisheries of the Russian Federation (RUSCOMFISH) continues to remain blind to this plunder.

Environmental critics like Greenpeace say this official organisation cares little for the danger to local marine resources because it is fuelled by the rush for hard currency.

Greenpeace estimates that only a third of the 4.5 million tonnes of fish caught in 1992 reached Russian markets. Joint yen-tines and direct agreements with foreign companies ensure that the rest goes out of Russia. In 1991-92, for instance, over 600,000 tonnes of Far Eastern fish, worth over US \$ 1.5 million, were shipped overseas.

The former USSR built a huge, large-scale fishing fleet of 1,200 vessels. Its total tonnage of 8.6 million was six to 12 times larger than that of the Japanese and American fleets.

According to Ernst Chernyi of the Union of Independent Fishery Workers Russian Federation, "all the Russian boats were concentrated in the hands of a few ventures, fled together to form a monopoly."

What is happening in the Sea of Okhotsk illustrates current problems. A small area in the centre of the Sea falls outside the 200-mile Russian exclusive economic zone. This territory is therefore

international waters. Any vessel from any country is free to fish in it.

In 1991, at any given time, 51 foreign vessels could be found there. They caught 700,000 tonnes. In 1992 the number of ships had risen to 90. Their catch too rose 150-200 tonnes daily or one million tonnes annually.

Last year's catch by foreign fishing fleets could well have crossed a million tonnes. This is much higher than the total allowable catch. In fact it equals the entire catch of Russian fishermen in the Sea of Okhotsk.

But, significantly, as Greenpeace stresses, fish know no boundaries. Thus, the pollock caught in the international waters are the same fish which dwell in the Russian part of the Sea of Okhotsk. As fish disappear in their waters, Russian fisherfolk suffer rising unemployment.

Or consider the Baltic sea. Russian Baltic fisheries are mismanaged too. The International Baltic Sea Fisheries Commission (IBSFC) was set up in 1973 to prevent a repeat in the Baltic Sea of the collapse of herring stock in the North Sea.

Industrial fisheries

But the IBSFC has not been able to arrest the decline of salmon and cod stocks. Industrial fisheries catch herring and sprat wastefully for fish-meal and oil. Fish stocks are so low that many fishermen now want to cull seals which poach fish from nets. The general depletion has also adversely affected other marine animals like seals, porpoises and seabirds.

The Baltic Sea, according to Greenpeace, has the dubious distinction of being the most polluted sea in the world. One result of persistent organic pollutant is a disease

called M 74, which kills some type of yolk-sac fry of Baltic salmon. Greenpeace finds it "alarming that the IBSFC has not taken any action or even informed salmon experts about the problem."

To compound the socio-economic crisis facing Russia's coastal communities, the shortfall in supply also pushes up prices for fish and fish products. The Committee for Fisheries predicts a four- to fivefold rise in prices in the near future.

This is ironic news coming from an official organisation meant to oversee the country's fishing industry and ensure delivery of fish to domestic markets. The Committee's mandate is impressive. It finances scientific research and conservation measures. It grants permits to fish and to build and buy fishing vessels. It allocates quotas and initiates inter-governmental agreements.

But, in effect, as Green-peace says, these functions essentially make up a closed and self-serving system which sets quotas, controls and organises joint ventures, small enterprises and joint-stock companies, as well as scientific investigations involving catches of thousands of tonnes of fish.

It is easy to see why the Committee for Fisheries is so interested in increasing catches. It gets to keep for itself 90 per cent of all hard currency profits from the export of fish and fish products. In 1993 the catch limits Ruscomfish allotted in the Far Eastern and Northern basins of Russian Seas exceeded 180,000 tonnes of pollock, cod and haddock. That must have fetched us \$ 132 million. Again, two years ago, the Committee granted 5,000 tonnes of cod to Inter-Atlantic, a joint venture which it itself had helped set up.

But some critics say that Ruscomfish is, nonetheless, foundering. For the 1993-95 period, the Committee has asked for state subsidies of about us\$3 billion to support 'falling' fishing enterprises.

Greenpeace and other concerned environmentalists in Russia want the Committee's functions to be transferred to an independent body like the Ministry of Environmental Protection and Natural Resources.

The Ministry itself is at loggerheads with Ruscomfish. This is clear from a June 1993 letter to the Russian Council of Ministers written by E. L. Shirokov, Assistant to the Procurator General of the Russian Federation.

"The fish protection and departmental fishery science organs," it read, "having turned out to be playing the role of businessmen, assist the sale of fish to the foreign fleet, and frequently they are malicious violators of fishery laws that they themselves established."

The Ministry's State Marine Service also filed a criminal suit against Ruscomfish for 7.7 million roubles for overfishing 85,000 tonnes of Pollock in the Severomorsk region.

Says Ernst Chernyi, "Obviously, the status of fisheries in the Russian Federation has not undergone any changes of major significance since the break-up of the Soviet Union."

"The Committee for Fisheries retains its vice grip on almost every aspect of the industry," Ernst Chernyi continues. "If we want to preserve our fish stocks so they will be available for future generations, we must bust the fishery monopoly that still exists in Russia." ■

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This article draws on analyses by Greenpeace, official Russian government documents and a report in *Eco* by Ernst Chernyl of the Union of Independent Fishery Workers Russian Federation