

# Hook, line and sinker...

## Questioning "The End of the Line"

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"The End of the Line" is an 82-minute documentary video on what is represented to be a global crisis threatening the total collapse of world fisheries, and even complete oceanic ecosystems, over the next few decades. It was sponsored by four non-profit organisations and exhibits a production quality considerably greater than its understanding of fisheries.

A few very selected examples of overfishing are combined with impossible economics, naive ecology, alarmist doom casting and generous dashes of eco-waffle to present a picture of looming catastrophe.

Awesome statistics are used to good effect to impress without really informing. For example, the claim is made that pelagic longline fishing sets 1.4 billion hooks a year on lines that could go 550 times around the world. What is not explained is that a hook set only lasts a few hours and these awesome numbers amount to an average set rate of about one hook in ten hectares of ocean, for a few hours, once in a year, over the vast tropical and warm temperate ocean areas in which this fishery is conducted. It is also not mentioned that this technique is a crude form of fishing with a very low catch rate.

To a large majority of viewers without specialist knowledge, this documentary would appear well done and convincing. If Australian viewers come away thinking that more restrictions and regulations on our own fisheries are needed and desirable, it will have succeeded in the propaganda purpose of the recent publicity campaign and widespread public screening here.

### The real story

Consideration of many other facts, also unmentioned in the film, reveals a quite different picture. Globally, about 25 percent of fisheries are overfished, about 50 percent are fished at near maximum sustainable levels and about 25 percent are fished at levels less than they could sustain. However, it is important to understand that overfishing does not usually lead to a severe collapse of stocks. It simply means that the catch could be improved by reducing fishing pressure to allow breeding stocks to recover and then adjusting effort to maintain the stocks at a more productive level. This is not just wishful thinking but is repeated real world experience with numerous stocks in many places. Overfishing can, is being, and will be successfully addressed; although, admittedly this may often be done less promptly and effectively than one might expect in a better world.

"The End of the Line" conjures up the spectre of extinction with dark incantations about ecological collapses and threatened and endangered species when, in reality, fishing has never resulted in the extermination of even a single species of marine fish or invertebrate. The ocean is a big place and even in the most intensely fished regions there are large areas where distance, conditions and abundance of commercial species make fishing uneconomic. Even where fishing is most intense, only a small fraction of a fishing ground can be fished on a given day and fish move around. Although catching more than is sustainable is quite possible, catching all of them is not. Falling catches from overfishing are self-limiting. Below a certain level it is uneconomic to continue fishing and rising fuel costs are likely to raise, not lower, this level in the future.

### The Thai industry

A real world example of what happens when unregulated fishing is permitted to grossly overfish may be seen in Thailand. It has a fishing area almost twenty times smaller than does Australia and about one-tenth of the shelf area, but its total catch is over ten times greater and its harvest rate per square kilometre is some 200 times greater. Thai fishery production peaked almost two decades ago, but has declined only a little since then. By any standard of fisheries management, Thai fisheries are overfished by a large amount. Even so, they have not collapsed. What has happened is that they have changed. The bulk of the catch is now made up of small, fast growing, plankton feeders. Anchovies, sardines, scads, Indian mackerel

and squid dominate the pelagic catch while so-called trash fish make up most of the demersal catch.

However, our notion of "trash" or by-catch is misleading in that in Thailand all of it is processed directly or indirectly (via fish meal) into much higher value products.

Environmental correctness poo-hoo's this as fishing down the food chain; but, the reality is that each step down the chain provides an order of magnitude increase in biomass and an even larger increase in sustainable harvest. None of the hundreds of species they catch has been lost either. However, their relative abundance has changed with humans taking a dominant place among the top predators.

Most knowledgeable observers of the Thai fishery (and many in it) would agree that with fewer boats the improved catch per boat would make for an economically more efficient industry. However, with most of the nation's animal protein supplied by fisheries and as many as ten million people dependent on them, cutting back on the industry to improve profits would be difficult to justify and even more difficult to implement. Although the current harvest level may not be optimal, there is no reason to believe it is not sustainable as it has maintained near present levels for the past 20 years.

### A fish a day...

Recent, well-conducted, large-scale studies have found significant benefits from seafood for a wide range of major health concerns. In Australia, literally billions of dollars could be saved in health care and gained in productivity in addition to inestimable improvements in quality of life for millions of people by increased consumption of seafood. That, with the largest per capita fisheries resource in the world, we have the lowest production entirely because of bureaucratic mismanagement and over-regulation, is inexcusable. That we have to import two-thirds of the seafood we eat, and all of it comes from much more heavily exploited resources elsewhere, is unconscionable. That we are selling off non-renewable resources to pay \$1.7 billion annually to import a renewable one we ourselves have in abundance, then call this sustainable management and pat ourselves on the back with the self-proclaimed status as the world's best fishery managers, is beyond moronic.

Incidentally, Thailand is the largest supplier of our seafood imports. New Zealand is second. The latter produces twice the tonnage of Australia and, far from being over-fished, a recent international survey rated their fisheries management as the best in the world. The latest Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics statistics show that the gross value of Australian fisheries production has declined by about 30 percent in real terms over the past decade and exports have declined by 44 percent. However, nowhere is this due to overfishing or a collapse of stocks. Everywhere it is due to restrictions, requirements and management-imposed costs.

### Fishy business

Regardless of what may be happening elsewhere, "The End of the Line" has utterly no relevance to the condition of Australian fisheries. This film is now being screened nationally and promoted by environmental NGOs who are advocating even more constraints on our own fishing industry when it is already rapidly dying from over-regulation. This gross libelling of a highly beneficial industry and misinforming of the electorate is doing a great disservice to the nation. If successful in the aim of further closing down our highly under-utilised fisheries and the only truly drought-proof sector of our food production, the very real and demonstrable result will be millions of people needlessly suffering from severe health problems and an early death.

Proliferating bureaucracy abetted by misguided environmentalism and corrupt agenda-driven research is the greatest threat facing this nation. If we do not wake up soon and begin to address this problem, the next decade or two will see us unable to even feed ourselves. If you think this is overstated, the fastest rising food prices in any OECD nation will soon change your mind.