

WE'VE HAD OUR CHANCE TO SOLVE the fishing crisis, and we've failed. Recklessly unscientific quotas, ridiculously damaging subsidies, lamentable management and second-rate enforcement are all to blame for emptying our seas of life.

Pressure on the world's fish stocks is at an all-time high. According to the UN, 85 per cent are fully exploited, over-exploited or have already collapsed. And no less than 40 per cent of global catch is bycatch – tens of millions of turtles, dolphins, sharks and other unwanted non-target species – that are thrown back into the sea, dead or dying, every year. There are no longer “plenty more fish in the sea”.

But I have a solution: ban all industrial fishing on the high seas. It may seem radical but, as we should know by now, when we fail to take appropriate action until the eleventh hour, the only options left are necessarily radical.

Under the UN Law of the Sea, coastal nations are granted Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) extending 200 nautical miles from shore, in which they have exclusive rights to fisheries (as well as minerals and other resources). High seas fishing takes place in international waters beyond these EEZs.

It's a gargantuan and mysterious industry. No other industry on earth would get away with its complete lack of transparency and accountability. With a clandestine operating system that limits information about where vessels operate, who owns them, the amount of fish they catch, the species they catch, access arrangements and complex global seafood supply chains, surprisingly little is known about its operations. What we do know is that many high seas vessels are fishing without licences, in protected areas and with prohibited gear – and they are responsible for significant declines in ocean wildlife populations.

There is some regulation of fishing on the high seas, through so-called Regional Fisheries Management Organisations.

These are made up of nations surrounding particular regions of the high seas

Conservationist Mark Carwardine would like to see an end to high-seas fishing to protect marine life



Overfishing is a driver of decline in ocean wildlife populations

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MARK CARWARDINE

OPINION

and distant-water fishing nations (whose fleets travel well beyond their own waters). Some are quite effective (the Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization comes to mind) but they rarely make tough decisions, enforcement is still sparse, and they have no powers of their own.

A complete ban is a bold idea, but it's not completely far-fetched. Most high-seas fishing is done by just five nations – mainland China and Taiwan account for 60 per cent, while Japan, South Korea and Spain make up about 10 per cent each. And most of their commercial fleets are heavily subsidised (after years of plundering the high seas, the fish are so widely scattered and hard to find that, without billions of pounds in subsidies, the industry would not even exist). The main hurdle is politicians. They suffer from “fisherphobia” (a fear of fishermen – I made that word up) and are running scared of the powerful fishing lobby.

But it's our best chance. An end to high-seas fishing would effectively create a vast marine protected area covering 59 per cent of the world's oceans, allowing many fish stocks to recover. Future fishing effort would then be concentrated in EEZs, improving accountability, removing the unfair competition facing legitimate fishing

operations and ensuring a fairer distribution of fisheries benefits (any untapped or excess fishing capacity can be sold to other countries or private companies). We'd still need international agreements

on the allocation of fishing rights, especially for highly migratory fish, but banning all high-seas fishing would be the single most efficient way of addressing the worst illegal, unreported and unregulated operations.

To paraphrase the great marine explorer, biologist and conservationist, Sylvia Earle, we must protect the world's oceans as if our lives depend on it. **W**

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