

Out of Stock

Marine conservationists collaborate with local fishermen from Playas del Coco to find sustainable solutions to overfishing. Late in the afternoon on the great lonely expanse of the Eastern Pacific Ocean the five-man crew of the Don Christopher begins hauling on board the day's catch. Confined for weeks on board this 45-foot vessel, the men have worked long hours trawling the open waters for commercial species of pelagic fish such as mahi mahi and tuna. In their search they have sailed hundreds of miles from home but despite their efforts the species they are targeting are becoming increasingly difficult to find.

The community of Placas del Coco, from where the Don Christopher originates, has a long history of fishing. It is here that Programa Restauracion de Tortugas Marinas (PRETOMA), a non-profit Costa Rican organization dedicated to the protection and restoration of marine species and the environments they inhabit, has been working with Papagayo Seafood, a local business with a fleet of fishing boats.

For the past 10 years the owners of the business, brothers Mike and Rick Bragg, have granted access to PRETOMA observers so that they may study the impact of long line fisheries on shark and impact, and foster responsible fishing practices.

On board the Don Christopher, PRETOMA's Allan Boylaff is gathering catch data and carrying out tests in order to determine which type of fishing hook causes less damage to endangered turtles that are often caught on the lines. The findings will then be presented as recommendations to Costa Rica's national fleet, which is the largest in Central America.

According to PRETOMA, the world's oceans are in peril. For the president of the organization, Randall Arauz, the situation is so serious that, "If we truly want commercial and endangered species to recover we need to limit fleets, especially large advanced foreign fleets. And we need a moratorium on long-lining activity in the international waters of the Eastern Pacific."

Mike Bragg points out that in all his years of experience, riding the ups and downs has been a basic reality of the business and that thorough research is essential before taking such drastic action. However, despite his more optimistic assessment of the fish stock situation, Mike admits a growing sense of urgency from the increased competition over the years.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization notes that the catches in fisheries across the board have been in decline since the late 80s. According to Ricardo Gutierrez, a senior official at the Costa Rican National Fisheries Department (INCOPECA) headquarters in El Coco, "we are fishing beyond the production capacity of the ocean." This means that the industry is currently on the downward slope of the bell curve where competitors are expending more and more time, energy, and money for fewer and fewer resources.

For a community like Coco the end of fishing would be socially devastating. Since the 60s fishing has grown from a handful of dug-out canoes to a long line fleet that directly supports approximately 300 fishermen and indirectly benefits hundreds more people.

Fishing is the cornerstone upon which this community was founded and without it hundreds of families would struggle to support themselves. However, the prospect of commercial fisheries either fishing themselves into extinction or reaching a point where legislators are forced to step in to protect remaining fish stocks is not so far-fetched.

Those who want fishing to remain a long-term industry in Coco suggest that rather than a complete suspension of all fishing activity, no new fishing licenses be granted, seasonal fishing restrictions be enforced and the activity of foreign fleets be cut drastically.

All sides agree that the entry of large, industrial, distant-water fleets, mainly from Taiwan, Japan, and Korea, has been one of the most problematic sources of competition. Because of the larger distances traveled, these international fishing vessels must recoup their higher costs by fishing much more aggressively, setting lines of up to 100 miles in length. Lines on local vessels average about 25 miles. The efficiency with which these boats harvest the sea is the most significant source of damage on the marine ecosystem.

Back on board the Don Christopher, the men are preparing for the three-day voyage back to El Coco. Besides the primary catch of mahi mahi, approximately 150 endangered Olive Ridley turtles were also caught and released. But these turtles were not the only endangered species on board. The fishermen may not have realized it but their way of life is in danger of extinction. Despite the positive progress made in the ten year collaboration between PRETOMA and Papagayo Seafood, local efforts can only go so far in protecting and responsibly managing marine resources thanks to the under regulated and over-efficient nature of high seas fishing.

In order to save the livelihoods of these people, breaks must be applied to an international industry running out of control. Costa Rica's long overdue new fisheries law that was passed February 2005 is a good start, but it is hard to please everyone. Some argue the new regulations are not enough whilst others believe the penalties on fishermen to be too harsh.

What is clear however is that overfishing is a global problem. Life in the oceans nest, feed, and migrates without frontiers. The solution to saving this common resource is regional and international agreements that are both respected and enforced by participating nations. Humankind, fueled by capitalism's inexhaustible hunger for easy profit, has demonstrated a worrying tendency time and time again to plunder resources until they are exhausted.

In Costa Rica the creation of awareness in coastal communities, normally marginalized by the state, will only give long-term results with hard work and cooperation of fishing communities.