

Transcript:

Australian Parliament

9 November 2005

Senate Hansard

Matter of Public Interest

Speaker: Siewert, Sen Rachel (AG, Western Australia, Opposition)

Senator SIEWERT (Western Australia) (1.11 p.m.)—I would like today to raise an issue that is of deep concern for me and an issue on which I have been working for many years, and that is marine conservation. I am pleased to be able to say that on this issue the government is showing some leadership. However, I would like to see more.

The three specific issues to do with marine conservation that I would like to deal with today are: illegal fishing—in particular, shark fishing—deep sea or high sea bottom trawling, and whaling.

... I now move on to another important issue—one that is also very topical. That is high seas bottom trawling. I again acknowledge that the government is showing some leadership on this issue, but I strongly feel that we need more, because this practice is a catastrophic one. It involves the dragging of nets the size of football fields across delicate sponge and coral ecosystems on the ocean floor. These are huge nets armed with steel plates and heavy rollers that basically plough up and pulverise anything in their path. In a matter of weeks, bottom trawling can destroy what took thousands of years to create. Deep sea structures are not merely damaged, they are obliterated. It is like clear-felling. After heavy trawling, the surfaces are basically reduced to sand, bare rock and rubble. Bottom trawling is destroying unknown and undiscovered worlds. I am sure many people have seen the disturbing image of that huge coral that was bigger than a human that was brought up from the deep sea. It was brought up and then thrown overboard. That basically resulted in the destruction of that ecosystem.

Recently, UK marine biologist Professor Callum Roberts, who was recently in Australia at a conference in Geelong, described bottom trawling as being:

... indiscriminate, scooping up unsustainable levels of the targeted fish as well as destroying their habitat and many other fish and marine life discarded as bycatch. It is devastating the world's last great frontier wilderness.

He also said: Urgent action is needed, as the damage being caused by bottom trawling could be permanent. Even if banned now the vulnerable ecosystems could take decades or centuries to recover. It is more like strip mining than harvesting.

We know that the current practice is not sustainable. I have no doubt that, with the global spotlight on this devastating practice, it is only a matter of time before the practice is clamped down upon as environmentally unsustainable, indefensible and economically short-sighted. That is why scientists and environmental organisations are calling for a United Nations global moratorium on high seas bottom trawling until sustainable management practices are developed and implemented.

The importance of this issue and the need for action are highlighted by the recent letter to Ministers Campbell, Macdonald and Downer signed by 107 participants at the recent International Marine Protected Areas Congress in Geelong, to which I just referred. The letter urges the Australian government to provide leadership for global

action to end the aggressive and damaging fishing practice of bottom trawling on the high seas. Just last month the Senate passed a motion urging strong action on this issue and support for United Nations General Assembly resolution 59/25, which urges strong action urgently and consideration on a case-by-case basis—and there was other stuff there—to prohibit the destructive fishing practices, including bottom trawling, that adversely impact on vulnerable marine species. As we speak, I understand that there are negotiations in the United Nations about what should be happening on deep sea bottom trawling. I strongly urge the government to heed the world's scientists who are now so strongly speaking out about the impact of deep sea bottom trawling.

Senator Ian Macdonald—How are you going to enforce it, though?

Senator SIEWERT—That is one of the issues that we need to start talking about, and if we do not talk about it we are never going to get there. However, we certainly need to start talking about it. We encourage the government to support measures that can be taken to put in place a global moratorium on bottom trawling and to consider how it can be enforced and regulated.