

Open Letter to the Right Honourable Paul Martin, Prime Minister of Canada and the Honourable Geoff Regan, Minister of Fisheries and Oceans Canada

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Dear Prime Minister Martin and Minister Regan,

We urge you to take advantage of a historical opportunity to secure significant protection for the world's deep-ocean ecosystems on the high seas – the two-thirds of the world's oceans that lie beyond the jurisdiction of any nation. We are calling on you to exercise Canadian leadership in the negotiation of a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawl fishing on the high seas at the United Nations General Assembly this year.

Supporting a moratorium would address the effects of foreign overfishing of straddling stocks that cross Canada's EEZ on the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. In addition, such an action would be in keeping with Canada's national and international commitments to biodiversity protection. We further urge you to take action in Canadian waters, by recognizing the effects of trawling and implementing habitat protection measures, gear restrictions and supporting the use of alternative and less destructive gear types. Both actions would be strongly supported by the Canadian public and Canada would truly be seen as a leader in the global movement to restore, conserve and protect the marine environment.

We would like to draw your attention to the fact that over the past several years the scientific community has expressed increasing concern over the impact of bottom trawl fishing on cold-water corals and other vulnerable deep-sea species and ecosystems. At the 10th Deep-Sea Biology Symposium and the 2nd International Symposium on Deep Sea Corals, both held in 2003, over 100 scientists signed a letter of concern to the United Nations General Assembly. The letter stated:

- populations of numerous commercially important species of fish and corals associated with seamounts, ridges, plateaus, continental slopes, coral reefs and sponge fields in the deep-sea have been serially depleted by fishing;
- benthic habitats and communities have been severely damaged by fishing activities;
- the biological characteristics of most deep-sea species render the deep sea particularly sensitive to anthropogenic disturbance and exploitation;

- although knowledge of deep-sea biodiversity is limited, evidence to date suggests that deep water habitats such as coral, seamount, seep and vent ecosystems are likely to harbour distinct assemblages of diverse and highly endemic species.

In 2004, 1,136 scientists from 69 countries, including over 84 marine biologists from Canada, endorsed the Scientists' Statement on Protecting the World's Deep-sea Coral and Sponge Ecosystems released at the February meeting of the American Association for the Advancement of Science calling on the UN General Assembly to adopt a moratorium on bottom trawl fishing on the high seas. In December 2004, the UK Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution expressed similar concern with respect to deep-sea bottom trawl fishing.

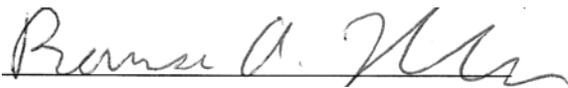
The lack of effective international regulations for the conservation of natural systems and the protection of the biodiversity of the deep sea on the High Seas, as well as within areas of national jurisdiction (EEZs), is a cause of great concern. In this regard, consistent with the precautionary approach, and given that conservation and protection of deep sea biodiversity is the responsibility of all nations, we recommend that:

- the UN General Assembly adopt a moratorium on deep-sea bottom trawl fishing on the High Seas effective immediately.
- Canada freeze the footprint of trawling in national waters and ensure that all areas currently closed to trawling do not reopen until adequate risk and impact assessments have been completed

We understand that Canada is hesitant about addressing trawl impacts and supporting a moratorium because it specifies one particular gear type. We would like to reassure the government that there is ample science documenting the negative impacts of this gear type on the sea floor, and that many scientists in Canada and in other fishing nations, have encouraged managers to implement precautionary measures, such as the moratorium, to specifically mitigate and reduce the impacts of trawling.

Prime Minister Martin and Minister Regan, this issue requires your leadership nationally and within the United Nations. We urge you to use the opportunity conferred on you as leaders in the movement for international fisheries governance reform, to support a UN General Assembly moratorium this year on high seas bottom trawl fishing vulnerable species, including deep sea corals before more of these ecosystems are irreparably destroyed and their wealth lost to both present and future generations.

Respectfully,



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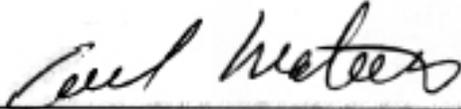
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