



PRESS RELEASE

For immediate release:

Tuesday 19 April 2005

INTERNATIONAL SCIENTISTS VISIT EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT WITH CALL FOR ACTION TO STOP THE DESTRUCTION OF DEEP OCEAN HABITATS IN INTERNATIONAL WATERS

Leading deep sea scientists today spoke out against the European Community's failure to fulfil its commitments to protect the seabed from high seas bottom trawling.

Addressing a gathering at the European Parliament, hosted by MEPs Paolo Casaca and Elspeth Attwooll, the scientists echoed concerns already raised by the United Nations (UN) General Assembly and the European Community itself, over the enormous damage caused by bottom trawl fishing to deep-sea corals and other rare and unique species, fish populations and sensitive deep ocean habitats worldwide.

The visit to Parliament by some of the world's foremost experts in marine science and conservation biology coincides with negotiations among European Union (EU) Member States on a common position on this issue ahead of a meeting of a UN General Assembly oceans working group (UN Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and Law of the Sea) in June of this year. Expressing grave concern about the future of the deep oceans if action is not taken urgently, the scientists joined the growing momentum calling for a UN General Assembly moratorium on high seas bottom trawl fishing and for the EU to support such a move.

Alex Rogers, Principle Investigator in Biodiversity Research at the British Antarctic Survey and a leading seamount expert who addressed the audience of Parliamentarians and Member State officials said: "These are extremely valuable and vulnerable habitats. The loss of biodiversity which we can already see happening is devastating and probably irreversible. There is such a clear scientific case for immediate action that there can be no excuse for delay."

MORE/2...

...International scientists/2

EU Member States have already committed to take action to preserve the biodiversity and habitats of the deep seas in international waters under a range of conventions and agreements including: the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement; the OSPAR Convention for the Protection of the Marine Environment of the Northeast Atlantic and the World Summit on Sustainable Development, but have resolutely failed to do so.

The UN General Assembly first called upon the international community in 2002 to "urgently" consider the risks to deep-sea biodiversity on the high seas from activities such as bottom trawling. In 2004, it reiterated its concern, calling for the elimination of ecologically destructive fishing practices on the high seas, specifically highlighting the threat posed by bottom trawl fishing.

Elliott Norse, President of the Marine Conservation Biology Institute, who joined Alex Rogers and Professor Ricardo Santos in Brussels, said: "High seas bottom trawling is the equivalent of driving a bulldozer backwards and forwards across a coral reef until it has been pulverized. These coral reefs are thousands of years old and it will take thousands of years for them to recover, assuming they can ever do so. When the coral dies, everything dependent on it dies too. This is the single most destructive fishing practice in existence."

According to a recent report, EU countries were responsible for approximately 60% of all high seas bottom trawl fishing worldwide in 2001. Matthew Gianni, advisor to the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC), which is supporting the visit by scientists, said: "The movement of bottom trawl fleets from the EU and non-EU countries into international waters in search of fish threatens highly vulnerable deep-sea ecosystems, placing many thousands of species at risk. Only a temporary moratorium, an effective time out from the trawling, will allow appropriate international measures to be put in place to preserve this heritage over the longer term."

The visit to Parliament by the scientists forms part of a European mission which includes similar events in Spain, Germany and the UK.

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Notes

In June 2004, over 1,100 of the worlds leading conservation scientists and marine biologists signed a letter of concern about the issue of high seas bottom trawling and called upon the UN to take urgent action to declare a moratorium on bottom trawl fishing on the high seas.

MORE/3...

...International scientists/3

Putting a halt to the practice of deep-sea bottom trawl fishing in international waters will pay dividends in protecting critically important sea-floor habitats and the many species that depend on them. This goal can be accomplished by securing a moratorium on high seas bottom trawling at the UN General Assembly, later this year. Such a moratorium would serve to temporarily prohibit bottom trawl fishing on vulnerable habitats across the high seas, including on delicate cold-water corals and sponge fields, while allowing time for scientists to assess the biodiversity of these areas and politicians to develop the medium and long-term measures needed to regulate them effectively.

More than 40 non-governmental organizations, working together under the auspices of the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC) are promoting an immediate UN moratorium on high seas bottom trawling. Momentum towards the achievement of this moratorium is growing rapidly.

For further information about the DSCC visit: www.savethehighseas.org

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