

World Fisheries Congress: Passion, but nothing new

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The recent 21st Century Fourth World Fisheries Congress in Vancouver saw a lot of passion, but little fresh insight.

The five-day 21st Century Fourth World Fisheries Congress in Vancouver, Canada, 2–6 May 2004, focused on how to reconcile the human use of aquatic resources with the conservation of ecosystems. It sought ways to manage fisheries without causing unacceptable losses of biomass, species, diversity, habitats and ecosystem function. To achieve this goal, it examined fresh, interdisciplinary ways to evaluate and maintain the economic and social benefits of healthy fisheries, in the face of global climate change, human population trends, competing habitat demands and the expressed desire for a future world of aquatic ecosystems endowed with natural diversity and resilience. The conference identified these as the major challenges facing the management of aquatic ecosystems.

There were seven plenary keynote speaker sessions during the five-day Congress. The concurrent sessions addressed each of the questions raised in the plenary keynotes. In his keynote address, Daniel Pauly addressed the need for reconciling fisheries and conservation efforts, using his much-presented assessment of fishery impacts on the ecosystem, based on a compilation and synthesis of historical information on a grand spatial and temporal scale, utilizing a mapping approach. The talk highlighted the decline of North Atlantic fisheries, how it occurred, and what to do to reverse the situation.

Kevern Cochrane of FAO/South Africa addressed the first of four critical questions: What should we care about when attempting to reconcile fisheries with conservation? He concentrated on concepts of equity and fairness, as well as responsible fisheries. The concurrent session discussed the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, treaties, international conventions, limits and restrictions, and monitoring.

The human dimension featured in issues relating to community management, stakeholders and effective institutional designs. The ecological dimension was covered in discussions on reference points, targets, thresholds and uncertainty in setting harvest and escapement goals. Also discussed were fisheries

trade, current and historical trade statistics, trade measures, ecolabelling, common markets, capitalization, and market and ecosystem interactions.

Historical lessons were sought through model reconstruction of past ecosystems and diagnosis of historical depletions. Speakers also dealt with how to maintain intact ecosystems, avoid extinctions and reverse local extinctions. On the matter of reconciling fisheries conservation with jurisdictional equity, the need for harmonization of law and management, in the context of international agreements, was discussed. There was also a session on the role of sport/recreational fisheries in minimizing fish mortality and maximizing value.

The second critical question, “Who owns the fish and what are they worth to society?” was presented by Steve Dunn of Australia, who sought to define issues of ownership, resolving conflict and evaluating costs and benefits to society, while attempting to reconcile fisheries with conservation.

Concurrent sessions

Five concurrent sessions followed. One focused on the mismatch between fish distributions and boundaries, in the context of straddling and migratory stocks. Another dealt with aboriginal, artisanal, small-scale and subsistence fisheries, their conflicts with large-scale sectors, and the issues of rights, harvest and stewardship.

“Can we get more fish or benefits from fishing while reconciling fisheries with conservation?” was the question presented by Yingqi Zhou of China, who looked at whether the limits of harvest, habitat and culture have been reached or exceeded, and whether there are any solutions or improvements that may be made to current social and economic benefits.

Concurrent sessions discussed the effects of fishing on increasingly smaller target species, including the effect on life histories, food chain effects and fishery collapse. Supplementary themes included conservation through stock enhancement, the role

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of hatcheries, sea ranching, re-stocking, supplementation, grow-out, invasive species, and introduced species and the challenge to reconcile fisheries with conservation. One session dealt with how to reconcile fisheries with conservation and the constraints of climate change, and how aquatic ecosystems respond to climate change. On the question "How can we manage fisheries ecosystems to achieve the reconciliation of fisheries with conservation?" speakers discussed how to reconcile fisheries with conservation and quantitative ecosystem indicators, and what quantitative management goals are needed for ecosystem management. Examples of ecosystem model approaches to fisheries management and where they have been successfully applied were analyzed.

The role of data quality and the imperative for improved methods in catch statistics was highlighted.

On the issue of overcapacity and effort management, case studies of effort reduction to reconcile fisheries with conservation were presented. A related topic was marine and freshwater protected areas, zonation, and temporal and spatial closures. After discussing improvements in fishing gear and techniques, and rectifying wasteful and destructive fisheries, the session turned its attention to stock assessment and adaptive management.

The session on habitat began with coral reef examples and the role of conservation in coastal zones, estuaries, enclosed seas, polar seas and deep seas as well as large rivers, natural lakes and human-made lakes, streams, watersheds and floodplains.

Apart from these concurrent sessions on keynote questions, there were dialogue sessions and an all-day 'Pathways to Reconciliation' session featuring presentations and panel discussions by leaders from the fishing industry, conservation organizations, and interest groups within the fisheries community hosted by the Sustainable Fisheries Foundation. Their goal was to improve communication among fisheries scientists and the non-scientists within the fisheries community.

The forum on the sustainable seafood movement provided an introduction to the use of social marketing strategies to advance ocean conservation, using illustrations from the seafood industry and other sectors. Panelists also highlighted the Seafood Choices movement, an effort to harness market forces and the power of consumer choice in favour of ocean conservation.

Innovative business–environment partnerships in the seafood sector, including ecolabelling and audits of seafood sources for sustainability, were discussed, as was fish farming as a potential source of environmentally friendly and healthy seafood.

The congress featured many social events too. At the opening welcome ceremony, the Copper Maker Dancers put up an excellent performance by the Kwagu'l tribe of the Kwakwaka'wakw people on the northwest coast of the US. The dances they shared were the salmon dance and the grease trail fun dance. The welcome reception also included a grand banquet with a sampling of local culinary delights prepared by some of Vancouver's best chefs.

There was no dearth of audience in most of the concurrent sessions, and a couple of those that addressed aquaculture or large-river issues were packed and the discussion was very lively.

But some sessions, such as those on small-scale fisheries or the ethical approach, were rather thin in participation. At the end of the conference, many participants commented that there was nothing new that this congress achieved although the speakers at the plenary discussion thought that there was a general consensus on moving towards a fisheries management regime with conservation as a priority. There were passionate outbursts as well—mainly on social science being neglected and not addressing the issue of poverty resulting from the decline of fish stocks such as that of the Atlantic cod, the small-scale fisheries sector being given little importance and the imbalance in representation from African, South American and Asian continents.