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Newswire

The Boris Worm war – is a truce possible?

Jim Meek | 4:41 AM



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NINE MONTHS after his landmark paper on collapsing world fisheries was published, Dalhousie University's Boris Worm admits that he feels like a "lightning rod" for scientists critical of his work.

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Dalhousie University professor, Dr. Boris Worm. (Tim Krochak / Staff)

The latest thunderbolt was tossed by Alan Longhurst, a former director of the Bedford Institute of Oceanography and a veritable Zeus inside the international community of fisheries scientists.

In an article just published in ScienceDirect, Longhurst challenges the dire prophecy that Worm and his 12 co-authors made in the research paper published last November in the journal Science.

That is, Longhurst disputes the view that all commercial fish species could collapse by mid-century if the fishing industry doesn't clean up its act.

Longhurst also takes on the publication for the "apparent failure" of the peer review process, essentially suggesting that the Worm paper should never have passed muster in the first place.

This battle sounds academic, but Canadian fishing interests, which are also critical of Worm's work, say "bad science" could pressure government regulators to put exactly the wrong fishing rules in place.

Patrick McGuiness, the head of the Fisheries Council of Canada, says the industry is particularly concerned about the link between scientific research and the international lobby to stop high-seas bottom trawling.

This could be "used as a launching pad to ban trawling inside Canadian or sovereign waters,"

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FOOD FOR THOUGHT

"We have two ears and one mouth so that we can listen twice as much as we speak. "

Epictetus

McGuinness said in an earlier interview. "It would also provide a justification for Greenpeace to jump on the roof of supermarkets in the United Kingdom to ban the purchase of any fish from a trawler."

(Bottom trawling is a \$1-billion a year industry in Canada.)

Late last fall, the United Nations rejected a ban on high seas trawling, but Greenpeace and many independent marine scientists are still pushing to stop the practice.

Worm's study was linked to the anti-bottom-trawling lobby because it was released weeks before the UN reached its decision — that is, at the very height of the international debate over the issue.

The publication had a major impact in the world media, with coverage in the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal and the Economist. Time magazine described its conclusions under the front-cover headline Oceans of Nothing.

But Worm's critics were just as quick off the mark. I heard from half a dozen fisheries scientists, from Canada, the United States, England and Australia, after first writing about this issue.

And none was more critical than Ray Hilborn, a well-respected fisheries scientist from the University of Washington. In one article, he accused Worm and his colleagues of indulging in what he called "faith-based science."

In a follow-up interview, Hilborn said "nobody in fisheries believes the study's lead line — that all fish will be gone by 2048 — has any credibility. And because they (Worm and his co-authors) chose to go with that . . . everybody is mad at them."

Hilborn zeroed in on several healthy fish stocks, including Georges Bank haddock, to make his point that you can't use catch records to determine species health. Worm's data would show this stock has "collapsed" because of low catches. But Hilborn said the haddock stock in the Gulf of Maine was at its "highest level of abundance in 40 years."

In his recent opinion article in ScienceDirect, Longhurst was at least as critical as Hilborn, suggesting that scientists "appear more likely than in the past to espouse social issues that are related to their research."

He was even more direct in e-mail correspondence, telling me that "while Worm's commitment to social issues is strong, his science is weak."

In some ways, the relationship between Worm and Longhurst seems cordial. At the end of his article, Longhurst even thanked the celebrated Dalhousie marine ecologist for "his courteous and helpful" input.

But Worm, who says he is working in the field this summer, was direct in an e-mail response to Longhurst's paper.

"He had a number of interesting ideas but did not attempt to provide rigorous support for them. I cannot take seriously his claim that peer review has failed just because our paper does not support his own ideas," Worm wrote.

"Our paper was subjected to the highest standard of peer review found in science, whereas Alan's paper is an opinion piece that was likely not peer-reviewed at all."

Still, the underlying criticism of Worm's work remains: Traditional fisheries scientists say he places too much stress on the link between marine biodiversity and the health of commercial stocks.

For the layman, this war is difficult if not impossible to sort out — and frustratingly so, for the environmental and economic stakes are so high.

But there is hope of a truce in the Boris Worm war. Both he and Hilborn confirm that they have jointly obtained U.S. funding to, in Worm's words, "determine where fisheries science and marine ecology

have common ground, and where and why there are differences in what we see when looking at the data."

Worm would like to "bridge the gap between the two fields and move forward together toward common goals."

About time, I'd say.

No sense in watching superstar scientists fight while the oceans get emptied. And a better scientific understanding of fish stocks and marine ecosystems is in everyone's interest.

Besides, Worm is sick of the sound of thunder. "Being a lightning rod is no fun," he says.

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