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Biologist Ransom A. Myers, 54; Warned of Overfishing in Oceans

By [Patricia Sullivan](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer
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Ransom A. Myers, 54, a world-renowned fisheries biologist whose research showed that the number of large fish in the world's oceans has dropped by 90 percent in the past 50 years, died of a brain tumor March 27 at a hospital in Halifax, Nova Scotia.

Dr. Myers, who analyzed vast amounts of data from government and industry reports around the globe, also said the size of large fish has declined dramatically in recent decades. Tuna used to be twice as big, and marlins were once as large as killer whales, he said.

He warned governments, the fishing industry and consumers that unless commercial fishing is sharply curtailed and management of fisheries is improved, many large marine species will become extinct. That, he said, could lead to economic disruptions, food shortages in seafood-dependent developing nations and lasting damage to marine ecosystems.

He said his conclusions were shocking because people had lost sight of the true magnitude of the declines because they did not look back far enough in history. Trained as a physicist and mathematician, Dr. Myers dived into local and regional fishing reports from all over the world, figured out how to examine and compare the numbers, and calculated what was happening to marine life in all the seas.

"He had the ability to see trends in vast amounts of data, extract those patterns and communicate them so everybody else could understand," said Boris Worm, a colleague at Dalhousie University in Nova Scotia. "His major contribution was really to wake up the world to the ongoing depletion of fish stocks, of marine



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life, worldwide."

Dr. Myers also asserted last year that appetite for shark-fin soup is ridding the world's oceans of one of its most ancient creatures and threatening ecosystems buffeted by overfishing. Some sharks, such as the hammerhead and the great white, have been reduced by upward of 70 percent in the past 15 years, and others, such as the silky white tip, have disappeared from the Caribbean.

The unintentional capture of fish not wanted by fishermen results in the death of 1.1 million fish each year, or one in four caught in commercial nets, he reported in 2005.

On March 30, the journal *Science* will publish a major paper, co-written by Dr. Myers and with details under embargo, about the importance of sharks in marine ecosystems.

"We certainly hope this most recent paper will add a great deal of insight into ecosystem problems in overfishing," said Charles H. Petersen, his co-author and a marine sciences professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Dr. Myers published more than 100 peer-reviewed papers and more than six book chapters, and he served on numerous international commissions on the population dynamics of marine organisms. Colleagues described him as warm and fun-loving, passionate about ferreting out information and so honest that he refused to couch his findings.

Andrew Rosenberg, former deputy director of the National Marine Fisheries Service at the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, called Dr. Myers "a consummate scientist."

"He'd say, 'I'm going to find all the data' on an issue, and he wasn't kidding. He'd find every data set available on fish population anywhere in the world. Not only was he a brilliant analyst but worked astoundingly hard, too," said Rosenberg, a professor of natural resources policy and management at the University of New Hampshire. "He had the ability to home in on what's the real question. It's not how many sharks are here, but what's the major change here. He figured out an analytical method that addresses the big questions."

A native of Mississippi, Dr. Myers received a scholarship and graduated from Rice University in Houston. From Dalhousie University, he received a master's degree in mathematics in 1981 and a doctorate in biology in 1984. He was the Killman chair in oceans studies there.

Working as a research scientist for the Department of Fisheries and Oceans in St. Johns, Newfoundland, during the 1980s and 1990s, he reported that the collapse of the northern cod population was not caused by hungry or aggressive seals, as government and industry officials said, but by industrial fishing practices and overfishing.

In 2004, he was one of six leading marine scientists who were hired as government advisers only to find their recommendations stripped from a National Marine Fisheries Service report -- that federal action was urgently needed to protect more than a dozen populations of West Coast salmon and steelhead trout from the threat of extinction.

"We were trying to do an honest job and we were called radical environmentalists," Dr. Myers told the *Los Angeles Times*. "It was troubling to administrators we objected to the policy that habitat did not need to be protected. There was a clear implication if we continued to talk about policy, the group would be disbanded."

Recognized by *Fortune* magazine as one of its Ten People to Watch

in 2005, Dr. Myers influenced a large number of environmental scientists, many of whom visited him in his last weeks in the hospital, Worm said.

Survivors include his wife, Rita Kindl-Myers, and five children, of Halifax.

"We are in massive denial and continue to bicker over the last shrinking numbers of survivors, employing satellites and sensors to catch the last fish left," Dr. Myers told Science Daily in 2003. "We have to understand how close to extinction some of these populations really are. And we must act now, before they have reached the point of no return. I want there to be hammerhead sharks and bluefin tuna around when my five-year-old son grows up. If present fishing levels persist, these great fish will go the way of the dinosaurs."

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