I have read Jeffrey Simpson's column and Jeff Hutching's comments re the COSEWIC conclusions. I really think they are missing a key point. For at least the last decade (and even before) the “drama” of cod stock decline has NOT been about fishing. There has been minimal fishing exploitation across the Atlantic on cod. This is evident in DFO's Research Documents on stock assessments. Since the turn of the century, fishing mortality rates (Fs) on cod stocks have been below 0.1 – and in many years best estimates have been F=0.0.

Simpson refers to Swain and Chouinard (2008) as “scientific” evidence when he says:

"Two DFO scientists recently wrote a paper saying that the cod would disappear entirely in 40 years at this level of fishing and that the stocks are now seriously imperilled. “ But, he neglected to say that WITHOUT FISHING (at low levels) the stock will be extirpated anyway! And that is the point facing cod stocks throughout the Northwest Atlantic – they are being preyed upon at such an elevated rate that they are marching “naturally” to extinction. So please, let’s not blame the fishermen of today, or expect that we must somehow “stop fishing” to save cod. This makes no sense –we have stopped fishing and cod cannot recover. Categorically, without question, there are ZERO opportunities to recover cod with F=0 fishing
.
This is why I therefore completely reject COSEWIC's narrow view that blames the mess of our oceans – and Atlantic cod in particular – on fishing impeding the recovery of stocks. That song is old. On the contrary, we have plenty of evidence that shows that stocks will NOT recover unless we reduce significant sources of “natural mortality”. At the same time, I think it is scientifically reckless and irresponsible to not acknowledge (as Swain and Chouinard do) that natural mortality has increased to dangerously high rates that ought to compel us to act.

I have discussed previously with Jeff Hutchings the elevated mortality attributed to seals, the prediction of the Swain and Chouinard paper, the fact of little fishing in the Gulf, and, finally, what we should do to recover cod by reducing the fishing by seals. His answer was striking and went like this: there are now simply too many (grey) seals out there to do anything realistically to reduce seal mortality and therefore the strategy of protecting cod from seals was not an option.

If we were to believe this, then Gulf cod are doomed to the Swain and Chouinard fate of extirpation in our lifetimes. This is not acting responsibly.

We do not resolve our past sins of creating an imbalance in the ecosystem (first by exploiting cod and seals, and then taking only cod while protecting seals) by stepping away from the mess we created and stand by – with full knowledge – while the ecosystem destroys itself (extirpation of cod, disease from overabundance in seals). This is not acceptable. Stopping fishing by itself is not the answer. A program to control natural mortality to save cod is clearly necessary.

We have to do more. This means we have to reduce the number of seals substantially, notwithstanding the controversy this would entail.

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TAGS: cod, COSEWIC, seals, fishing mortality, natural mortality, endangered, fisheries, sustainable, seals reduction

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