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Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force Launched

Expert team of international scientists is devising solutions for sustainably managing these small prey fish; overexploitation and inadequate management is threatening the marine food web

May 28, 2009 -- The Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University has launched the Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force, a team of 13 preeminent scientists from around the world that will develop management plans to tackle the unprecedented depletion of forage fish from our oceans. These small prey fish are a critical food source for marine mammals, seabirds, and many large fish species, and their excessive removal can undermine or even collapse marine food webs.

The Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force (<http://www.oceanconservationscience.org/foragefish>) held its inaugural meeting May 18-20 in Alexandria, VA and is the first scientific team to comprehensively address the management of forage fish globally. Supported by the Lenfest Ocean Program, the task force will examine the roles of forage fish within food webs over the next two years, and develop science-based “rules of thumb” and other management recommendations intended to prevent fishing-induced irreversible impacts on marine ecosystems.

Forage fish include so-called “bait fish” such as anchovies, herring, sardines and menhaden, as well as squid and krill. They are being increasingly harvested by industrial scale fisheries, and comprise nearly 40 percent of the wild marine fish catch globally. To date, management of these fisheries has been sparse and has generally not taken into account the needs of dependant oceanic predators. The task force will recommend specific fishery management measures that will maintain the ecological integrity of marine ecosystems in an era of increased fishing pressure.

“The overexploitation of forage fish has played out like the Wild West of the oceans, with minimal rules and a take-what-you-can mindset,” said Dr. Ellen K. Pikitch, Executive Director of the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science and chairperson of the Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force. “What’s been overlooked for far too long is that forage fish are key players in the ocean’s complex food web. Their excessive removal from the oceans threatens to cause a breakdown of a very complex ecosystem in which species are interconnected.”

Of the 31.5 million tons of forage fish taken from the world's oceans each year, 90 percent is reduced into fish meal and oil for livestock and aquaculture feeds, according to a recent study co-authored by task force member Dr. Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia in Vancouver.

“The Lenfest Task Force will provide the scientific foundation for managing forage fisheries in a more sustainable way,” said Charlotte Hudson, director of the Lenfest Ocean Program. “It will be critically important to implement the experts’ recommendations to ensure the long-term health of our oceans.”

The task force will develop specific guidelines for managing forage fish using an ecosystem-based approach, which incorporates food web dynamics and environmental factors, and breaks from traditional species-by-species management. These recommendations will be delivered by 2011 to policy makers, managers, and fishery council members.

Task force member Dr. Dee Boersma of the University of Washington, a world expert on penguins, stressed that the repercussions of myopic fisheries management extend much more broadly than one might assume. “Penguins are not the target of fishing operations, but they clearly are suffering the consequences,” Boersma said. “These flightless birds spend half their lives underwater, feeding mostly on krill, squid, and small fish. Their survival is directly threatened by excessive forage fishing, and our work will help to ensure that smart management is adopted to safeguard these and other treasured species.”

The distinguished Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force includes experts in a wide range of disciplines, including marine ecology, small pelagic fishery populations, marine mammals, seabirds, oceanography, climate, quantitative methods, ecosystem modeling, and fishery management.

Members are:

1. Dr. P. Dee Boersma, University of Washington
2. Dr. Ian L. Boyd, University of St Andrews, United Kingdom
3. Dr. David Conover, Stony Brook University (New York)
4. Dr. Philippe Cury, IRD - IFREMER & Université Montpellier II, France
5. Dr. Tim Essington, University of Washington
6. Dr. Selina S. Heppell, Oregon State University
7. Dr. Edward Houde, University of Maryland Center for Environmental Science
8. Dr. Marc Mangel, Jack Baskin School of Engineering, University of California - Santa Cruz
9. Dr. Daniel Pauly, University of British Columbia, Canada
10. Dr. Ellen K. Pikitch (Chair), Stony Brook University (New York)
11. Dr. Eva Plaganyi-Lloyd, CSIRO, Australia
12. Dr. Keith Sainsbury, University of Tasmania, Australia
13. Dr. Bob Steneck, University of Maine

The Lenfest Ocean Program (www.lenfestocean.org) supports scientific research aimed at forging solutions to the challenges facing the global marine environment. The program was established in 2004 by the Lenfest Foundation and is managed by the Pew Environment Group. The Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University is dedicated to advancing ocean conservation through science. Visit us on the web at www.oceanconservationscience.org.