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THE CONSERVATION OF OUR MARINE RESOURCES, A SHARED ENVIRONMENTAL AND SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Hammerhead shark fished in the reserve area of Point Piña (Darien), by a longliner from the national fleet.

World's oceans are inexorably collapsing: the list of threatened or endangered species, grow every day. We have seen recent news about the inclusion of the hammerhead shark (an intensely fished specie for their fins only) in the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Red List of Threatened Species.

The main causes of the decline of fishes can be summarized in the following:

- Overfishing, we are taking more than nature can replace.
- Many key species of the food chain and food webs, are part of the bycatch in various commercial fishing operations.
- The coastal development, pollution and predatory fishing practices are destroying essential habitats necessary for the growth and reproduction of the species.

Several international organizations are creating awareness about the critical situation of world's oceans, due largely to overfishing. The fishing industry began a new phase in the middle of the last century, and since then it has become highly technified with more powerful boats, sophisticated fish finding equipment, and larger nets. Important fisheries collapsed in the North Sea, Africa, Asia and the Mediterranean.



The collapse of a fishery occurs when the cost of extraction exceeds the market price, because the sizes and volumes do not compensate the investment made. The result is the bankruptcy of businesses and unemployment. Often the idle fleets move from one area to a more productive one, repeating the same pattern of over-exploitation.

The more destructive fleets because of the high volumes of bycatch that impact other species that are not relevant to the specific fishery, are shrimp trawlers and longliners. None of these fleets use selective fishing gear.

Many juvenile fish species of commercial value die during shrimp trawler operations, affecting the availability of the resource in other fish activities, such as small scale fisheries.

The pelagic longline is the most widespread form of fishing gear and the activity of international and local longline fleets has contributed to a rapid decline of large predators around the world. These fleets operate even in areas where the species congregates to reproduce, all of which aggravates the situation.



Shrimp boats and longliners carrying out commercial operations, were detected by sport fishermen, within the reserve area of Point Piña (Darien) in January 2008. This situation is usual since there is no effective patrol to control illegal fishing in national waters. There are constant violations of the Executive Decree No.1-B of January 1994, which establishes a reserve area for sport and tourism fishing taking Point Piña as the epicenter within a radius of 20 miles.





BILLFISH HAVE MORE VALUE ALIVE THAN DEAD.

THESE SPECIES REPRESENT A VALUABLE ASSET FOR SPORT AND TOURISM FISHING.

IT IS URGENT TO TAKE ACTION AT A REGIONAL LEVEL, IN ORDER TO PROTECT THE RESOURCE.

Billfish, a highly migratory and widely distributed species, are greatly affected by longliners and tuna purse seiners; billfish are a target species of sport tourism fisheries, in a catch and release mode. The mortality caused by these fleets endangers an industry that generates billions of dollars around the world, and which in turn benefits millions of people because of the added value it generates.

STOP THE BILLFISH SLAUGHTER BY THE INDUSTRIAL FLEETS.



In general, the situation of the marine resources is increasingly threatened, with the social and economic consequences that entails, as overfishing of one specie affect others.

The species depend on each part of the ecosystem to survive, but these are kept under constant attack. As examples we can mention how the shrimp trawling industry continuously destroys communities where the bottom is dragged, helping to create underwater deserts. Moreover, pollutant emissions from different sources, reach important coastal ecosystems that support abundant marine life at different stages of development. This pollution creates imbalances that generate toxic red tides that kill many fishes and cause health problems for humans. Coastal development without adequate controls, deforestation, and landfills, destroys important habitats as estuaries, mangroves, and coral reefs.

In 2003 Canadian scientists estimated that the global fishing industry contributed in the last fifty years, to the 90% decline of large predators such as sharks, billfish, and tuna.

A study published in 2006 shows that if the trend of biodiversity loss in ecosystems by overfishing, pollution and other environmental impacts is not reversed, there will be a collapse of fish populations by the year 2048.

Most of the fishery managers are not aware of the true magnitude of changes in marine ecosystems. The reason is that studies are implemented several years after fishing exploitation starts, and when there has been a decline in volumes and sizes of capture. More often these studies are never carried out because the lack of capacity and political will of governments.

Our country is not exception to the global trend. The main species of commercial interest are over-exploited; the impact of shrimp trawlers and long-liners in non-target species affects other fishing activities, and there are evidences of the destruction of habitats.

To meet all these challenges and provide appropriate solutions requires a strong institutional framework with clear objectives that do not fall into contradictions.

The Authority of the Aquatic Resources of Panama (ARAP), must maintain a delicate balance, since one of its objectives is the sustainable development of fishing and aquaculture, while at the same time charged to protect the ecosystems.

To fulfill its objectives ARAP should establish appropriate measures based on an ecosystemic vision and scientific studies.

We should not forget that human race survival is linked to the ocean, taking into account all the basic services that it provides as climate regulator, source of food, transport, and recreation.

