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WHERE HAVE ALL THE FISH GONE?



Fishing boats jam the harbor in New Bedford, MA after the recent closing of prime fishing grounds on Georges Bank.

For centuries, fishermen have traveled from the New England coast 120 kilometers east to the submerged plateau called Georges Bank, one of the world's prime breeding and feeding grounds for fish and shellfish. There, they would quickly cram their holds to bursting with cod, haddock, herring, flounder, lobster, shrimp, clams, and many other species.

Most people thought the party would never end. But since 1850, when halibut all but disappeared from the Bank after an intense period of overfishing, there have been signs that the resource was not infinite. In fact, decline in fish stocks is a worldwide problem.

Though one species after another has become scarce on Georges Bank, measures strong enough to preserve its wildlife were resisted. Declines in the last twenty years have been especially rapid. Today, even the familiar codfish is hard to find.

Finally, on December 7, 1994, officials closed 9,600 square kilometers of fishing ground on Georges Bank, home to 60-80% of the commercially valuable fish. If they hadn't taken that step, many say, the Bank would soon be a desert.

Now, boats lie idle up and down the New England coast as families that have fished for generations wonder whether they'll ever fish the Bank again.

Is overfishing the only cause of this crisis? Can the stocks on Georges Bank be replenished? Will fish farms replace the "wild" species that have been lost? This issue, we'll seek solutions to this deep-sea mystery.