



Unplanned ecological engineering

Andersen, Ken Haste; Gislason, Henrik

Published in:

Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America

Link to article, DOI:

[10.1073/pnas.1620158114](https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1620158114)

Publication date:

2017

Document Version

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

[Link back to DTU Orbit](#)

Citation (APA):

Andersen, K. H., & Gislason, H. (2017). Unplanned ecological engineering. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, 114(4), 634-635. DOI: 10.1073/pnas.1620158114

General rights

Copyright and moral rights for the publications made accessible in the public portal are retained by the authors and/or other copyright owners and it is a condition of accessing publications that users recognise and abide by the legal requirements associated with these rights.

- Users may download and print one copy of any publication from the public portal for the purpose of private study or research.
- You may not further distribute the material or use it for any profit-making activity or commercial gain
- You may freely distribute the URL identifying the publication in the public portal

If you believe that this document breaches copyright please contact us providing details, and we will remove access to the work immediately and investigate your claim.

Unplanned ecological engineering

Ken H. Andersen^{a,1} and Henrik Gislason^a

Fisheries can double the production of protein and revenue by abandoning current single-species management. This provocative prediction is the implication of the work in PNAS by Szuwalski et al. (1). Using the East China Sea as a case, they show how an indiscriminate fishery can support unexpectedly large catches by removing predators from the ecosystem. Such ecosystem engineering stands in stark contrast to reigning management paradigms that do not allow fishing down predators to increase the productivity of their prey.

The theoretical support for such a feat of ecosystem engineering is well developed (2, 3). Trusting the Chinese catch statistics, Szuwalski et al. (1) provide empirical evidence that theory may be turned into practice. But their work is more than “just another fisheries paper;” it underscores highly controversial issues about the unavoidable trade-offs in managing fisheries and ecosystems. If we narrowly consider food security, maximizing fisheries catch from the ecosystem is a “no-brainer,” but from a conservation point of view, the loss of biodiversity in the East China Sea may seem like Aquacalypse come true (4). Can we really double fisheries’ production by turning the oceans into mega-scale mariculture operations? Is it what we want?

Is It Really True?

The surprisingly large catches in the East China Sea are reached by the ecological process of prey release. The removal of large predatory species from the ecosystem releases a substantial production from their prey, smaller species that are usually kept in check by predatory fish (Fig. 1). In this manner, the fishery can harvest what would otherwise have been eaten by the predators. This ecosystem cultivation parallels how humans turned from hunter-gathering to agriculture: By removing grazers from crops and isolating grazers from predators, the production of crops and meat for human consumption could be increased to levels beyond what natural ecosystems could support.

It is difficult to perform controlled experiments on natural ecosystems. Consequently, Szuwalski et al. (1) resort to ecosystem models to explore the impacts of fishing. They use a “size spectrum” model that compensates for the lack of detailed information about the feeding relations among all species in the East China Sea, with a reliance on the rule that big fish eat smaller fish (Fig. 1). The model rests on balance between growth and mortality: Growth and reproduction of a larger predator are fueled by the death of its smaller prey. This process is a biologist’s version of mass conservation, and it is responsible for the observed prey release.

Models are idealizations of reality, and our understanding of ecosystem processes is far from complete (5, 6). Even though prey release seems logical, not all models support it. For example, a highly influential paper did not see increased catches when all components of an ecosystem were fished (7). By demonstrating correspondence between model simulations and the outcome of the “ecosystem experiment” in the East China Sea, Szuwalski et al. (1) lend credibility to models that replicate prey release. Combining this evidence with observations of trophic cascades, increases in smaller species when predatory fish are overfished (8, 9), makes prey release seem a likely process.

Even though the oceans are severely altered by fishing, they are still wild and uncontrolled ecosystems. Things may therefore not go as planned: Similar to how an organic corn field may be invaded by weeds or insect

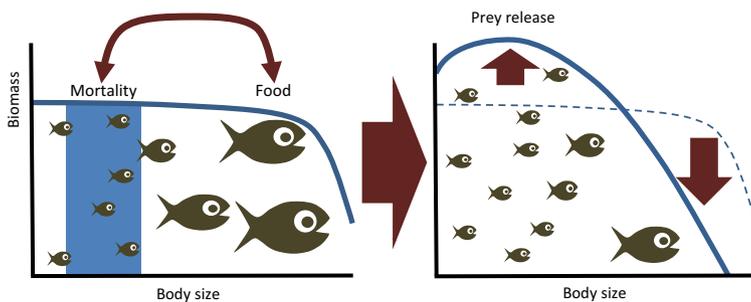


Fig. 1. Illustration of how prey release leads to a large total fisheries catch. As large species are overfished, the predation mortality on their smaller prey (blue patch) is reduced. This reduction in predation mortality releases these highly productive species and allows fishery to catch the released production. Consequently, the catch from the ecosystem is maximized when most large species are fished out of the system.

^aCentre for Ocean Life, National Institute of Aquatic Resources, Technical University of Denmark, 2920 Charlottenlund, Denmark

Author contributions: K.H.A. and H.G. wrote the paper.

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

See companion article on page 717.

¹To whom correspondence should be addressed. Email: kha@aqu.dtu.dk.

pests, the desirable and highly productive small fish and invertebrates left in the ecosystem may be taken over by undesirable production. The system may, for example, turn into a jelly field (10), and large outbreaks of giant jellyfish and other species have indeed been reported from the East China Sea and Yellow Sea (11). Further, the model version used has a fairly optimistic view of recruitment, the process whereby new offspring are establishing themselves in a fish population. The model can therefore sustain high catch rates, whereas, in reality, the simulated high fishing pressure (up to 95% of the standing stocks are caught every year) makes individual fish populations highly susceptible to crashes. The high catches obtained in the East China Sea and similar heavily exploited systems, such as the South China Sea and the Gulf of Thailand, therefore come at the price of an ecosystem that is not only impoverished in terms of biodiversity but is also increasingly fragile. It is therefore questionable whether the high production can be sustained.

Is It What We Want?

High production is, however, only one aspect of fisheries and ecosystem management. Management faces a trade-off between balancing high yields and food security with high profit and conservation of biodiversity (12). Narrowly focusing on one aspect will compromise the others: You cannot have your fish and eat it too. One extreme is an ecosystem free from fishing. It is a highly diverse ecosystem teeming with diverse life, from small forage fish to large predatory species. However, it does not deliver any catch or economic profit from fisheries. Pleasant as it may seem, a global implementation of this paradigm would require substitutes for the 10% (13) of the world's animal protein production supported by wild-caught fish. The other extreme is the East China Sea and similar heavily exploited ecosystems. Such indiscriminately fished systems are dominated by small and short-lived species such as zooplanktivorous fish, shrimp, and squid.

Recognizing this trade-off, Szuwalski et al. (1) suggest that a restoration of the ecosystem toward balancing the opposing objectives of food production and biodiversity comes at a cost: about a 50% reduction in yield and revenue.

Regarding economy, the last aspect in the trade-off, Szuwalski et al. (1) offer only a partial view: They report the value of the catch but not the costs. The prediction that the value of the catch is smaller in a restored ecosystem makes restoration appear economically unattractive for society. Such may not be the case. The high production comes at the cost of an overcapitalized fishery, and the direct costs of extracting the high catches make such a fishery less attractive from an economic perspective (14). Accounting for costs by maximizing profit instead of revenue would lead to lower exploitation rates. Doing so could, at least partially, accommodate conservation of biodiversity (3). Further, the impoverishment of the ecosystem will have economic consequences beyond the fishing industry (e.g., in recreational fisheries or tourism). A comprehensive economic analysis that includes the costs of indiscriminate exploitation will make restoration more economically attractive for society.

Pretty Good Management

Szuwalski et al.'s work (1) reminds us that management needs to develop scenarios that strike a balance between food production, profit maximization, and biodiversity preservation. Emotionally, we want to have our fish and eat it too, and find it difficult to choose. A recently suggested compromise suggests that by foregoing the maximum catch of a fish stock and accepting just a "pretty good yield" (15), a catch close to the maximum, we can expect substantial increases in profitability and conservation. In an ecosystem context, this compromise may translate into an operating space for ecosystem management that allows for a pretty good fulfillment of all three objectives (16).

- 1 Szuwalski CS, Burgess MG, Costello C, Gaines SD (2017) High fishery catches through trophic cascades in China. *Proc Natl Acad Sci USA* 114:717–721.
- 2 Matsuda H, Abrams PA (2006) Maximal yields from multispecies fisheries systems: Rules for systems with multiple trophic levels. *Ecol Appl* 16(1):225–237.
- 3 Andersen KH, Brander K, Ravn-Jensen L (2015) Trade-offs between objectives for ecosystem management of fisheries. *Ecol Appl* 25(5):1390–1396.
- 4 Pauly D (2009) Aquacalypse now—The end of fish. *New Repub* 240(18):1–5.
- 5 Froese R, et al. (2015) A critique of the balanced harvesting approach to fishing. *ICES J Mar Sci* 73(6):1640–1650.
- 6 Andersen KH, et al. (2016) Assumptions behind size-based ecosystem models are realistic. *ICES J Mar Sci* 73(6):1651–1655.
- 7 Worm B, et al. (2009) Rebuilding global fisheries. *Science* 325(5940):578–585.
- 8 Daan N, Gislason H, Pope JG, Rice JC (2005) Changes in the North Sea fish community: Evidence of indirect effects of fishing? *ICES J Mar Sci* 62(2):177–188.
- 9 Frank KT, Petrie B, Choi JS, Leggett WC (2005) Trophic cascades in a formerly cod-dominated ecosystem. *Science* 308(5728):1621–1623.
- 10 Schnedler-Meyer N, Mariani P, Kiørboe T (2016) The global susceptibility of coastal forage fish to competition by large jellyfish. *Proc R Soc Lond B Biol Sci* 283(1842):20161931.
- 11 Dong Z, Liu D, Keesing JK (2010) Jellyfish blooms in China: Dominant species, causes and consequences. *Mar Pollut Bull* 60(7):954–963.
- 12 Hilborn R, Stewart IJ, Branch TA, Jensen OP (2012) Defining trade-offs among conservation, profitability, and food security in the California current bottom-trawl fishery. *Conserv Biol* 26(2):257–266.
- 13 FAO (2016) *The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture* (Food and Agriculture Organization, Rome).
- 14 Teh LSL, Witter A, Cheung WWL, Sumaila UR, Yin X (September 23, 2016) What is at stake? Status and threats to South China Sea marine fisheries. *Ambio*, 10.1007/s13280-016-0819-0.
- 15 Hilborn R (2010) Pretty good yield and exploited fishes. *Mar Policy* 34:193–196.
- 16 Rindorf A, et al. (May 12, 2016) Food for thought: Pretty good multispecies yield. *ICES J Mar Sci*, 10.1093/icesjms/fsw071.