NZ enforces a huge no-go zone for bottom trawling

1.2 million square kilometres of New Zealand's ocean territory is to be zoned for protection. Nadezda Pyastolova

At a 20-nation fisheries conference held in Wellington during February, New Zealand announced an unprecedented arrangement to ban destructive seabed trawling in approximately one-third of its waters – the largest closure to this controversial type of fishing in any national zone.

Opponents to bottom trawling, including scientists and conservation groups who have waged a heavy media campaign, say the process, which involves ships dragging heavy nets across the deep seabed to catch various fish species, indiscriminately destroys fragile and critical benthic marine ecosystems that may never recover.

To reach the decision, New Zealand brokered an agreement with major fishing companies for approximately 1.2 million square kilometres of ocean floor to be zoned 'Benthic Protection Areas' (BPAs), where a ban on bottom trawling and other types of invasive fishing will be enforced. Ratification of the planning is expected by October 2006.

New Zealand's Fisheries Minister, Jim Anderton, said the new zones encompassed representative habitats for the country's offshore waters, and took in a range of depths. In announcing the agreement he declared it a 'win-win for conservationists and fishermen'.

The response from environmental groups, however, including WWF and Greenpeace, who were campaigning heavily at the conference, was expectantly guarded – some were very disappointed after calls from around the world to ban bottom trawling in the South Pacific altogether.

Greenpeace, who had demanded a temporary ban on bottom trawling across the southern oceans, responded with a press release that suggested sell-out deals in the zoning detail, and a failure to represent all the vulnerable habitats at risk from destructive trawling.

BCC News reported a WWF spokesperson expressing regret that the planning was another sectoral, rather than ecosystem-based, management approach that was likely to fail.

Jim Anderton said that New Zealand would ultimately support a global moratorium on bottom trawling provided it had sufficient international reinforcement to make it a practical option.

The fisheries conference, hosted by the New Zealand, Australian and Chilean governments, was organised to discuss management of the international waters of the South Pacific, where there is currently little control over fishing methods or knowledge of species' states. A South Pacific Regional Fisheries Management Organisation (RFMO) was planned.

The head of New Zealand's delegation, Stan Crothers, said more progress on interim measures to address the impacts of trawling had been aimed for, but that the outcome was nevertheless heartening given the first-time attendance of some representatives. He expected more progress when talks reconvene in Australia during November.

PC power recruited to compute climate change scenarios

In a democratic initiative organised by Britain's BBC, people around the world have been using the spare computing power of their PCs to help run complicated projections on climate change impacts, via a screen saver.

The BBC and Oxford University are running what they claim is 'the world's largest climate change experiment' – using downloadable BOINC software developed at the University of California, Berkeley, to harness the collective idle computing power of at least 10 000 personal computers, generating more model calculations per second than the largest supercomputer.

Using this 'distributed computing', the Oxford researchers are engaging the large spare capacity on PCs to help tackle the high number of variables that underlie climate change prediction.

Air temperature, sea temperature and cloud cover, for example, all play a part in climate outcomes – as do dozens of other variables, including 'feedback mechanisms' such as increased heat absorption over melting ice, which kick in as secondary influences once certain conditions are reached. There are, therefore, a huge number of calculations involved, and individual PC power can pitch in by testing models with different combinations of variables.

The BBC's climate change experiment has seen enthusiastic participation from people around the world. www.bbc.co.uk

More information:
www.bbc.co.uk/sn/hottopics/climatechange