Half a century of overfishing, including a devastating crash of the North Sea cod fishery in the nineties, should have been warning enough that we cannot negotiate nature’s limits.

Unfortunately not. Now ICES is advising that North Sea cod populations are at such depleted levels, that there should be a 70 percent cut to fishing limits in 2020, compared to 2019.

The need to drastically reduce fishing of North Sea Cod will be a disaster for many fishers. In many ways it is also a political disaster for fisheries ministers.

Why? Because the need for such a low catch limit could have been prevented if decision makers had
listened to what scientists have been telling them for years.

Even now, by following scientific advice, they can still help deliver healthy seas and food security for all EU citizens, and more profitable fisheries for the whole fishing industry, that governments signed up to with the reformed Common Fisheries Policy.

Fisheries ministers have not been listening, but they must now pay attention.

There is no good excuse for not ending overfishing. EU fisheries ministers are in charge, and it can and must be done - not least at the coming EU council meetings in October and December, where fisheries ministers will agree on catch limits for the Baltic and North East Atlantic.

They must face up to the consequences of their poor record on protecting the fish populations that underpin the health of European Seas, not only in the North Sea but in all European waters, and change their ways now.

The EU has committed to end overfishing of all fish populations by 2015 or progressively by 2020 at the latest.

However, with just six months to go, consistent stonewalling by fisheries ministers and a refusal to follow the science has led to a situation where iconic fish like North Sea cod is again facing collapse, and our ocean ecosystems are suffering.

The good news is that it can, in fact, be changed and the benefits from doing so are numerous.

“Our children are protesting against the biodiversity and climate emergency that we have created - and yet EU governments have continued to ignore this fact by undermining the ocean ecosystems that underpin life on earth”

Restoring fish populations is vital for food security and the continued possibility to catch and eat fish for generations to come, but healthy fish populations are more than that. They play a key role in keeping marine ecosystems balanced as a whole.

The ocean gives us more than half of the oxygen we breathe, regulates the global climate, has captured a third of the carbon we have emitted, and has absorbed 90 percent of the extra heat we have generated.

We need the ocean healthy. If it is, it will be one of our closest allies in combating the climate crisis.
Our children are protesting against the biodiversity and climate emergency that we have created - and yet EU governments have continued to ignore this fact by undermining the ocean ecosystems that underpin life on earth.

Short-term business profits for a few fishing industry players are being politically prioritised over nature, healthy coastal communities, food security and a healthy ocean that can adapt to the climate emergency.

EU fisheries ministers must wake up and become part of the solution rather than part of the problem.

Let’s change history for the better. It can be done, but only if we start now.

**About the author**

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