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Development threatens almost half the world's coasts

Michele Deakin, Oceanside Star
Published: Monday, August 11, 2008

Increasingly the declining health of Canada's oceans and the critical state of its salmon and other fisheries are in the news. This isn't surprising since we're very much a coastal nation, with seven million Canadians or 25% of our population living in coastal areas. In BC about 75% of our population lives on the coast, and over 70% of our economic activity takes place in the ocean and on its shores.

People have settled on the coast in BC for many reasons. Originally coastal communities developed because of proximity to food, natural resources and ocean-going transportation routes. More recently BC's coast has become a haven for retirees and those looking to develop and invest in recreational properties.

Our oceans and our shorelines were once viewed as a boundless resources. They were places to dump sewage and industrial wastes, fish without limits, and pave over sensitive ecosystems such as estuaries. It's now estimated that 80% of the pollution in our oceans originates from land-based activities.

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The impact of a growing global economy and population on our marine environment has finally reached crisis levels. In the last 50 years, industrial fleets have fished out 90% of all large ocean predator fish such as tuna, sharks, cod, and halibut. And now, the capacity of the oceans to act as a huge carbon sink for carbon dioxide is being exceeded. Marine waters are growing in acidity, affecting the shell

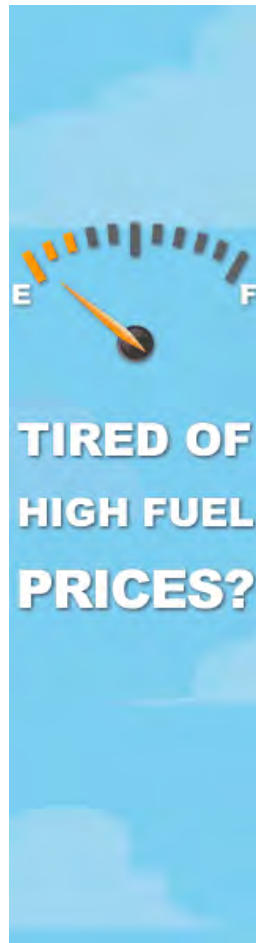
and skeletal development of coral, plankton, and shellfish.

Other pressing issues include increasing algae blooms that reduce oxygen levels and affect the survival of many fish species. Meanwhile, shoreline developments are removing vital habitat for forage fish, the basis of our food chains. Alterations including damming, water intakes, thermal or heat pollution, and water diversion and extraction. All of these activities can alter the salinity, temperature, and possibly the nutrient and sediment levels, which can directly alter sensitive habitat such as nursery areas or sea grass beds.

According to Canada's National Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities, development-related activities threaten almost 50% of the world's coasts. The intense pressures on these coastal systems require a serious commitment to take preventive action at all levels – local, regional, national and global.

But using the current conditions of our marine ecosystems as a baseline for decision-making may not set the standard high enough. It's estimated that today, Canada has only 30% of its original salt marshes and wetlands. So even if things appear fine on the surface, what we have now may not be fully functioning systems.

Puget Sound has lost up to 70% of their sea grasses, including eelgrass. Now that they know what it means to lose their coastal systems, state, and federal agencies are spending millions of dollars annually on restoration efforts. Unfortunately, recreating the complexity of nature is a tall order and scientists are not sure that they will be successful. The Georgia Basin has not been changed as much as Puget Sound but could easily get to that point if we don't take the needed steps to prevent it.



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Of course declining biodiversity and increasing levels of pollution in our oceans and coastal waterways are merely symptoms of our unsustainable economy. One in which the land we develop, the resources we consume, and the wastes we produce exceeds the carrying capacity of our environment.

A recent study that looked at the influence of human social structure on the decline of marine biodiversity asked the questions: "Can nations 'grow their way out' of environmental problems? Is continued economic growth compatible with conserving biodiversity?" They concluded that the answer to both those question was 'no.'

Wild pacific salmon have long been a powerful symbol of BC's coast. But many fisheries biologists are now voicing their opinions that "it's time to recognize the fundamental conflict between economic growth and salmon recovery." They suggest that, if we choose to do otherwise, salmon will continue their decline.

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If we and our political leaders don't get the message that it's time for a new economic model, one based on sustainability instead of unsustainable growth and development, wild salmon could soon become a fading memory.

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