

February 2018—AQUACULTURE PERSPECTIVES

Copyright © 2018 Fisheries Technology Associates, Inc. All rights reserved. Copying and distributing or reprinting for purposes of resale without expressed permission of the author is prohibited.

Mayhem in the oceans must stop!

by Bill Mancini

During recent years, Allstate Insurance has developed a series of clever and hilarious commercials with a human character called “Mayhem.” This character does what he can to cause as much destruction as he can, in a way that actually endears him to the viewers. These ads certainly are memorable and achieve Allstate’s intent. Alluding to them in this column is a testament to that accomplishment.

Let’s be clear. The mayhem underway in the world’s ocean is not at all funny, and certainly not endearing to anyone. Unfortunately, this mayhem is just as memorable and lasting, if not more so, than the Allstate ads.

All too frequently, I come across stories in my daily reading and viewing that make me cringe. These stories involve innocents and their daily struggle for survival.

Who are these unwitting creatures to whom I refer? They are the fish and marine mammals and birds of the world more commonly referred to with the fisherman’s euphemism “bycatch.” Defined as the unintended capture of non-target species, bycatch has been a problem since fishing gear was first put in the water.

Actually, “bycatch” is too benign a term for what really happens in the oceans. “Entanglement” is a subset of bycatch, and is used most often to describe the inadvertent capture or snaring of what are usually air-breathing animals.

While the word “entanglement” is more accurate, it still falls short of reality.

What actually occurs is more disturbing and more horrific. A television program called Sea Rescue tends to put the problem in sharper focus. As I do my weekend treadmill workout at the gym (which happens at about the same time on Saturday), a wall of televisions is at my disposal to help pass the time. Invariably, Sea Rescue has been selected, along with the day’s live sporting events.

Sea Rescue tells the stories of various organizations that are called on to free or treat unsuspecting ocean creatures such as whales, sea lions, seals, dolphins, porpoises, otters, manatees, birds, and other marine wildlife from certain death at the hands of tended or abandoned fishing gear.

In an effort to bestow some optimism about our future on its viewers, I suspect Sea Rescue chooses the cases that more or less have a happy ending. I fear (and know from available data) that too many of these events ultimately end in the death of the victims.

Whether fishermen care to admit it or not, their profession is at a crossroads, and has been for decades. Our aquatic systems maxed out their production more than 20 years ago. The best we can hope for is keeping wild fishing yields at their current levels—a total of about 92-95 million metric tons per year.

Please understand, I do not begrudge the hard-working men and women who call commercial fishing a career. It's what they know. But, just like other disruptive technologies, aquaculture eventually will move commercial fishing into and past its sunset. While this is unfortunate for a segment of our society, it's inevitable.

Commercial fishing (i.e., hunting and gathering in aquatic systems) is not only inadequate to meet the food requirements of people, but has a benefit/cost ratio that is falling rapidly.

On the cost side, entanglement is the perfect example. Each year, countless tons of fishing gear are lost due to breakage or abandonment. This gear literally will float around in our environment for decades or longer, and the problem only gets bigger over time. Marine mammals and birds, as well as unsuspecting and untargeted fish, end up paying the price. Suffocation and drowning, starvation, deep cuts and wounds, and other assaults should not be imposed on these innocent victims.

While aquaculture is not a complete, end-all solution to this problem, it must be a significant path toward that solution. By removing fishing pressure on our wild stocks of fishes and marine mammals and birds, and putting that pressure squarely on aquaculture—where it belongs—we give them a fighting chance to recover.

I am realistic enough to know that commercial fishing will continue to be with us well into the foreseeable future. But let's admit it. Commercial fishing (more precisely, hunting and gathering) is obsolete as a way to produce food. We abandoned it on land 10,000 years ago with the advent of terrestrial agriculture.

Farming in water is simply a Johnny-come-lately. But, if we continue to develop aquaculture as quickly as we can, it can be our salvation as we relegate commercial fishing—and its unfortunate downside—to the annals of history.

*Bill Mancini is president of Fisheries Technology Associates, Inc., a Fort Collins, Colorado-based aquaculture, aquaponics, and fisheries consulting firm. He may be reached at 970-225-0150 or <[mancini@ftai.com](mailto:mancini@ftai.com)>.*