



**Atlantic cod may be made endangered species**

Associated Press

ST. JOHN'S, Nfld. — Atlantic cod could be downgraded to an endangered species Friday by a group of independent wildlife experts gathered to review at-risk species.



But if the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada takes that step, it will be years too late to prevent the disaster that has occurred on the East Coast, say some experts. "In terms of management, we're about 15 years too late," said Ransom Myers, a biologist at Dalhousie University in Halifax.

Some sub-populations of cod are already extinct, Myers said Thursday. Others have been reduced to a fraction of their previous numbers.

"The fact we're even talking about having cod being considered an endangered species just shows how there's been gross mismanagement over so long," he said.

Kim Bell, a biologist at Memorial University in St. John's, said he recommended the committee designate some individual cod stocks endangered five years ago.

In 1992, stocks were low enough for the federal government to declare its first moratorium on East Coast cod. Over the years a small commercial fishery reopened, but last week Ottawa announced an indefinite closure of most of the remaining fishery, saying stocks faced commercial extinction.

In 1998, Bell prepared a report for the committee in which he said some individual Atlantic cod stocks were already endangered. Although the committee claims to be independent, Bell said his recommendations were ignored and his report rewritten to support a political decision.

"This was one of the world's great fisheries and we eliminated it," Bell said.

In 1998, the committee listed Atlantic cod as a species of special concern. That same year, Ottawa allowed a small commercial fishery.

The committee recognized that cod overall had declined significantly without appreciable recovery despite the moratorium. But it said there were still large numbers.

Sandy Baumgartner, of the Canadian Wildlife Federation, said it was controversial for the committee to look at a commercial fish species at all.

She said the committee's 1998 decision relied too much on information from the Department of Fisheries and Oceans, she said.

"DFO was in the business of improving and enhancing and promoting a commercial fishery," Baumgartner said. "They were not in the conservation business."

But both Baumgartner and Bell expect the committee will downgrade cod to endangered when it makes an announcement Friday in Whitehorse on several species. Members of the committee could not be reached for comment Thursday.

"The designation itself doesn't accomplish conservation," said Bell. "It's merely an alert to a problem and a guide to the seriousness of the problem."

Designation as an endangered species has no legal force in Canada. However, under new species-at-risk legislation, which comes into effect later this year, there will be some legal protection.

The committee's list will form the basis of a list of legally protected species.

"It's not too late," Myers said.

In April, American plaice, Atlantic halibut, haddock, silver hake, Golden redfish and white hake were among dozens of species listed as high priority candidates for assessment because they are deemed to be at some risk of extinction at a national level.

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