

Threats to trawling give one species of deep-sea fish unintended protection

BY CHRISTOPHER POLLON

High fuel costs and the rise of the Canadian dollar are crippling British Columbia's ocean trawling industry, with the unintended effect of protecting one of the province's least known and most vulnerable deep-sea fish.

The species is the longspine thornyhead, a type of rockfish that has adapted to the crushing water pressure and near-zero-oxygen environment found a kilometre below the surface. Harvested by bottom trawlers primarily off the west coast of Vancouver Island, these fish can survive five months between meals, live up to 50 years, and possess eyeballs so unusually bulbous and leering that fishermen refer to them as "idiotfish."

"B.C.'s bottom-trawl fisheries are among the best managed in the world, but this is not one of them," says fisheries analyst Scott Wallace of the David Suzuki Foundation who has been calling for a moratorium on the longspine thornyhead harvest since March. "This is a case where high fuel prices have achieved conservation gains faster than anything else."

Thornyheads are caught by a fuel-intensive fishing method known as bottom trawling, in which a weighted net is dragged along the ocean floor. Fishing for longspine thorn-

heads is particularly sensitive to fuel prices because of the need to run an onboard freezer (which requires a separate engine), and the need for longer tows because the fish are not concentrated in dense schools.

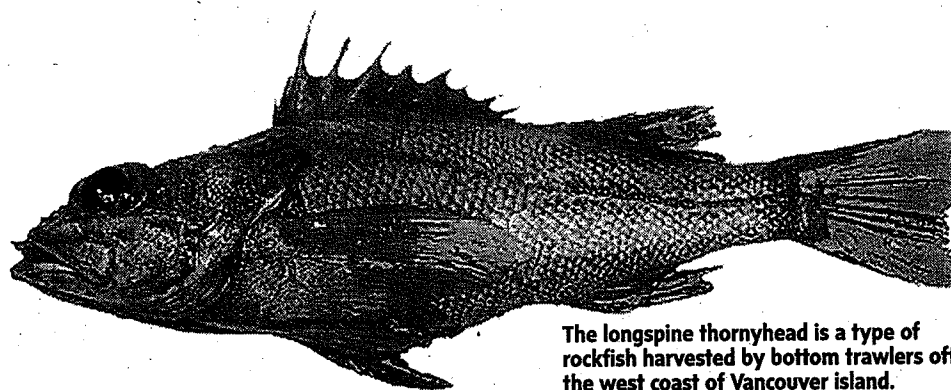
Brian Mose is co-owner of the trawler Frosti, the only vessel to fish for thornyheads so far in 2008, and he says fuel is the most serious factor keeping trawlers tied to the dock.

"Fuel is killing us, there's no question. I can deal with the lower demand, I can deal with the exchange [rate] even, but fuel is something else. Every trip we're shaking in our boots by the time we get in, wondering when we're going to get pushed over the edge."

At about 40 metres in length, the Frosti is a bigger trawler than most, consuming up to 2,650 litres of diesel a day during trips that last between two and five days. Mr. Mose says that in 2000, when the thornyhead fishery was near its peak, fuel was typically 9 per cent of the gross value of a fishing trip; today, it is closer to 35 per cent.

Trawlers have also had to deal with a strong Canadian dollar, which has erased the benefits they enjoyed when the loonie was worth 70 cents (U.S.) and less.

Another problem has been changes in the Japanese sea-



The longspine thornyhead is a type of rockfish harvested by bottom trawlers off the west coast of Vancouver Island.

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION

The Rapid Demise of the 'Idiotfish' in B.C. Waters

In 1996, Fisheries and Oceans Canada opened a directed fishery for longspine thornyheads in B.C. waters, despite a near-complete void of abundance and life-history data. Catches increased dramatically through the 1990s, peaking in 1999; by 2004, commercial-catch data suggested that thornyheads had declined by more than 50 per cent.

Between April of 1996 and May of 2007, more than 15,000 trawl tows were directed at longspine thornyheads along a narrow band of deep-sea habitat primarily off the west coast of Vancouver Island, covering nearly

500,000 kilometres.

In April of 2007, longspine thornyheads were listed as a species of "special concern" by an independent body of scientists from the Committee on the Status of Endangered Wildlife in Canada, recognizing that, without drastic management changes, the stocks will continue to decline toward threatened and endangered status.

The federal government will decide later this year whether the longspine thornyhead warrants legal protection under Canada's Species at Risk Act.

» Christopher Pollon

food market, which is the sole destination for longspine thornyheads harvested from B.C. waters. Most British Columbians have never seen or tasted thornyheads, which are sold in Japanese restaurants as *kinki* – where the fish is marinated for days in saki and miso and baked or barbecued. Demand has declined, in part because of the availability of thornyheads from Alaskan and Russian fisheries, and in part because there's decreased demand for rockfish in general, due to the growth of the farmed-tilapia industry.

Then there is the self-defeating factor: Fewer longspine thornyheads are out there to be caught because so many were taken during fatter times. The end result is that

fishermen are forced to fish longer and burn more fuel to catch the same amount of fish.

The cumulative effect has been a dramatic decline in fishing effort: The thornyhead fishery has gone from about 12 vessels at its peak in 1999 to just one so far this year.

This chill on the thornyhead fishery extends to the entire trawl fleet of B.C., which includes at least 70 vessels that target and trade quota on up to 60 different species caught by bottom and mid-water trawl, including 12 species of rockfish, three types of cod and at least five species of sole.

At risk, said Mr. Mose, are thousands of jobs that rely on these fisheries, which unlike the typically short and intense openings for herring and salmon, are annual fisheries that employ a broad cross-section of people in such towns as Ucluelet, Port Hardy and Prince Rupert for 12 months a year.

"I don't know if there's a light at the end of the tunnel," said Mr. Mose, who charters the Frosti to scientists and construction companies for at least four months a year. "On top of everything else, now there's a new carbon tax on fuel, which is pretty insulting when you're already on your knees."

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