

By Tony Wu

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CRYING WOLF

Aesop was a slave who lived in sixth-century Greece, who, according to the historian Herodotus, penned a collection of stories known today as Aesop's Fables. Among the many and popular tales attributed to this talented scribe is one that came to mind recently — The Boy Who Cried Wolf.

In short, a shepherd boy without much to do came to the conclusion that screaming “Wolf!” might be a fun thing to do. Each time nearby residents came to the rescue, however, they found only a giggling young shepherd, but no wolf. Eventually, when a hungry wolf really did appear, none of the neighbours answered the young prankster's desperate calls for help, and the fortunate carnivore enjoyed a sumptuous feast of sheep (in some versions, shepherd too).

What got me pondering this lupine lesson recently was a man named Worm.

Dr. Boris Worm, an Assistant Professor of Marine Conservation Biology at Canada's Dalhousie University, published (with colleagues) an article in the 3 November 2006 issue of *Science* that warned of the collapse of fisheries by the year 2048.

Media outlets immediately picked up on the story. Headlines pronouncing the impending demise of all fish appeared worldwide in print and online. To quote but one of hundreds of reports, the *Los Angeles Times* highlighted Dr Worm's statement that “100% of [fished] species will collapse by the year 2048, or around that”.

northern cod



fishmongers

Claims like this recall Thomas Malthus' famous 1798 prophesy that the world would run out of food and suffer global famine by the mid-1800s. In the same vein, writer Paul Ehrlich predicated in his 1968 best-seller *The Population Bomb* that: "In the 1970s and 1980s hundreds of millions of people will starve to death in spite of any crash programs embarked upon now." Despite being spectacularly wrong, both Malthus and Ehrlich received disproportionate attention and credence. Fortunately, within hours of the global media mania spurred by Dr. Worm, more sensible voices intervened, though they received decidedly much less publicity.

The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) noted that while conservation efforts must be improved, it was "unlikely" that major sources of seafood would disappear by the middle of the century. It labelled the report "statistically dangerous". (Note: Dr Worm's study was based in large part upon FAO data.)

Serge Michel Garcia, director of the FAO's fishery resources division, criticised: "Such a massive collapse... would require reckless behavior of all industries for four decades, and an incredible level of apathy of all world citizens... without mentioning economic forces that would discourage this from happening".

Other scientists chimed in. Dr. Ray Hillborn, professor of fisheries management at the University of Washington cited major flaws in analysis and admonished Dr. Worm et al. for making exaggerated claims. "This particular prediction has zero credibility within the scientific community," he said.

Steve Ralston, senior fishery biologist with the US National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, pitched in, calling the report "enviro-sensationalism".

Here's the thing — some fisheries really are in trouble. Stocks of bluefin tuna are down. Overfishing of deep-sea species is rampant. Some species of sharks are literally being wiped from existence. We need to act, but apocalyptic (and inevitably inaccurate) claims about the end-of-the-earth are counterproductive. They distract from real issues, in the end alienating people, rather than garnering support.

One of the major consequences of doomsday predictions is the very lesson that Aesop tried to impart so many years ago — people stop listening. The challenge for us all is to learn to focus our efforts on addressing real issues, while ignoring little boys who cry wolf.