



STRANGE DAYS ON PLANET EARTH: SEASON TWO

“Dangerous Catch”

A series of strange, seemingly unrelated events are unfolding across the globe. In the West African nation of Ghana, olive baboons are ransacking crops and terrorizing villagers. Further down the coast, putrid fumes are rising from the ocean depths off Namibia, causing whole towns to gag. Half a world away in Puerto Rico, space-age aquapods filled with fish are floating far out at sea, while off the coast of New Brunswick, Canada, migratory salmon are settling into coastal life astride kelp and mussels in a radical new farming experiment.

These events can be linked to one activity—over-fishing. Recent reports state 90 percent of our most important commercial fish are gone, and fisheries all over the world are in dire straits. Our insatiable demand for seafood is affecting more than just life in the ocean, however. Bizarre, often unpredictable, effects are rippling out far beyond the shoreline.

We begin in the steamy heat of south-central Ghana where biologist Justin Brashares and his team have come to survey antelope. They find that antelope numbers have plummeted along with large animals like lions and leopards that used to keep olive baboon numbers in check. Released from predation, the crafty, hard-to-catch baboons have now multiplied into a menacing force that is wreaking havoc throughout the countryside. What happened to the antelope and the predators of the baboons? Delving into dusty archives where decades of animal population records lie hidden, Brashares discovers a shocking link — hunting pressure on Ghana’s large animals increases in direct proportion to fish supplies. With foreign fishing fleets stripping West Africa’s waters of protein-rich fish, the bushmeat trade is booming.

As Brashares continues his research, other researchers are witnessing disturbing events further down the coast. In Namibia, ecologist Bronwen Currie is working with satellite oceanographer Scarla Weeks and biologist Andrew Bakun to understand what’s behind a putrid stench that periodically overwhelms the coastal villages and towns. Following the arrival of the vile, inescapable odor, countless dead fish carpet the beaches and bastions of lobsters flee the sea. While Currie investigates the seafloor where decaying algae create a primordial stew of toxic gases, Weeks looks to daily satellite images of the ocean’s surface to forecast the next big event. Through dogged sleuthing, the team reveals these stench events are orders of magnitude larger than ever imagined and may be influenced by over-fishing of a small silver fish, the sardine. Furthermore these events are releasing copious amounts of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere. Bakun suggests other hot spots worldwide may be approaching a similar explosive state. Could over-fishing drive these places to their tipping-points? What can be done?

While some scientists work to conserve massive tracts of ocean, others are tracking animals to reveal and protect migratory routes and mating grounds. And others, like Brian O’Hanlon, hope to reduce fishing pressures by tending fish like ranchers tend livestock. O’Hanlon is creating space-age aquapods in Puerto Rico — raising fish offshore where waste is easily diluted by strong currents, unlike many inshore fish farms. In the foggy reaches of New Brunswick, Canada, another biologist, Thierry Chopin, is conducting a novel experiment — building small ecosystems of salmon, mussels and kelp in hopes of creating a lucrative, environmentally friendly fish farm. Can marine reserves, fish ranches and other solutions stem the tide of change and help restore the bounty of life in the world ocean? It’s now becoming clear that by reducing our take from the ocean and restoring wild fish stocks, we might also be helping life on land and ultimately the entire life-support systems of the planet.