

# The UN experience

by Sarika Cullis-Suzuki

*When I was done, I knew instantly I must have said something wrong.*

If someone had told me this is where I'd end up, I would never have believed them.

Yet here I was, just six months after completing my MSc at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre, at the United Nations Headquarters in New York City about to address a roomfull of delegates-in-suits seated behind little country name plates... wondering what the heck I was doing.

The 2010 United Nations Fish Stocks Review conference took place May 24 to 28<sup>th</sup> 2010. This was a global forum convened to evaluate the effectiveness of the 1995 UN Fish Stocks Agreement<sup>1</sup>. Current examinations on fisheries bodies and fish stocks on the high seas were particularly pertinent to this conference: PEW<sup>2</sup> was interested in the results of our recently published paper on the global effectiveness of regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs), so asked Daniel Pauly to present our findings. But Dr. Pauly was to be in Peru at the time of the UN event, and thus could not make it. So he sent me.

The research Dr. Pauly and I carried out describes the effectiveness of the current 18 global RFMOs (see *Sea Around Us* 55), i.e., the international fishing organizations that were established to 'manage' and 'conserve' fish stocks on the high seas. The main findings of our work are that RFMOs are neglecting to uphold their duties as established by the UN Fish Stocks Agreement, and are thus failing the high seas; literally: they score low both

in theoretical effectiveness (as determined by their written texts) and even lower in practical effectiveness (as determined by the actual state of the stocks they manage).

At the UN event in New York, everything was interesting... even the lineups (I had my photo taken with Mr. Joji Morishita while in line, like a true tourist). After getting a pass (to get our *real* pass), we were well on our way, and after security we were finally inside. And now it was impossible not to get caught up in the excitement and bustle of the place: hundreds of people from all over the world, all walking with purpose, dressed up in suits or traditional wear, and oh! There's Mr. Ban Ki Moon! Exhibits, full rooms, speakers with flags waving behind them... It felt like... like this is where things came together, like this is where progress was being made. The historic sculptures representing justice and peace overruling war and hatred added to the place's powerful impression. We felt part of something very grand indeed.

All this temporarily distracted me from the task at hand, and suddenly it was time to get ready for my talk. The delegates began filing into the room, and I was fiddling with the translator box, wondering why it was suddenly so hot in here.

Had I known the audience would include the very people I evaluated in my research- i.e., delegates of many of the world's RFMOs- I doubt I would have used such strong language or been so direct in speech. But I was lucky: I *didn't* know. So I was bold.



*With Mr. Joji Morishita, Counsellor of the Japan Fisheries Agency.*

There were four of us speakers on the panel, all connected with PEW. I followed the mc, my presentation lasting only 10 minutes. When I was done, I knew instantly I must have said something wrong. You could have heard a pin drop. And then, up shot the hand of a representative of Norway (those name plates sure are handy) who apparently couldn't wait until the other speakers had presented: he had to voice his displeasure with my

*Continued on page 5 - UN meeting*



*Standing outside of the UN building.*

#### **UN meeting - Continued from page 4**

methodology and my data right away, and tell me just how wrong I was.

And so it went, after the other three panelists had spoken- two scientists and a lawyer, all women- for an hour and a half: the questioning continued. And almost every question was launched at me. And almost all the questions were criticisms. I was beginning to wonder what I had done wrong, or how I could be any more clear- most of the 'comments' were the same, and so I found myself repeating things, with special emphasis on the fact that I could only state what the data showed. When one particularly determined delegate asked where I got my data from, because they *had* to be faulty, I had to answer him honestly that I took them from his RFMO's website. He finally went quiet. Through their questions and reactions it was clear that these were business people first, and conservation organizations second; they had little patience for my results or my conclusions. Of course I understood that they had to defend their organizations, but it saddened me to hear them pick out and argue the mundane details of my study and painstakingly ignore the big picture.

When it was all over, I didn't feel good. I didn't feel happy or satisfied. I felt like bawling. I felt very guilty for having upset these people. Further, it wasn't a pleasant experience to 'defend' myself and my work over and over to a bunch of agitated strangers. And it was troubling to have people angry with my work because they say they don't understand it... only to follow up with the comment that they don't 'have time' to read the research and become informed. Overall, when it was done I felt sad. Watching people refuse to take

ownership for the state of the very things their organization was founded for, and depends on, was harsh.

At that moment, I understood why people, especially scientists, don't speak out. Because it can make you uncomfortable. On so many levels. And it forced me to question myself: were my statements too strong? Did extrapolating to the global scale make my study's results inherently useless? How am I even qualified to speak with any confidence about these things? I wondered if, in the end, I had any right to be addressing these people and making statements on these powerful organizations.

A few days later, safely back in Vancouver, I got a phone call from someone saying the conference and the results of the press briefing were all over the internet. A quick Google search revealed just how broadly the event had been picked up. It occurred to me that had my language been anything less than strong, my speech any less direct, my conclusions less severe, the audience at the conference would surely have been half the size. I am sure I would not have been quoted in the media. And I am sure I would not have upset anyone. In short, I doubt my presentation would have mattered. Conversely, though perhaps a long shot, I hope the outcome of this event and the findings of our research cause some heads to turn, force an RFMO member to pause and think about the impact of their organization, or shock someone reading Fox News.

Throughout this whole UN experience I have been conscious of how important every step was, and how often, science doesn't end with something as satisfying as a publication. Indeed, science will lead you, if you let it, to something highly unsatisfying, unsettling, and... invaluable.

Thanks to the Pew Environment Group and the *Sea Around Us* Project for this insight.

#### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> Also known as the Agreement for the Implementation of the Provisions of the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea of 10 December 1982 relating to the Conservation and Management of Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks.

<sup>2</sup> This study was funded by the Pew Environment Group.

*... it was clear that these were business people first, and conservation organizations second; they had little patience for my results or my conclusions.*

