Cassandra, from Greek mythology, could foretell the future, but none would believe her predictions. There are contemporary Cassandras foretelling a future to unlistening ears.

Last spring, the scientific journal Nature reported severe depletion of global fisheries. Many fish populations are ten percent of what they were fifty years ago. This isn't surprising if you read "Lament for An Ocean: the Collapse of the Atlantic Cod Fishery" by Michael Harris. He describes giant trawlers that dragged two hundred foot wide nets. The lower edge was weighted to scour the ocean floor. The net's mesh caught everything larger than a cigarette. Large fish were canned, salted or frozen, small fish were processed for oil, fishmeal, fertilizer, pet or livestock feed. The substantial remainder was crushed and dumped. The ocean floor was clear-cut as breeding grounds and protective cover for juvenile fish were destroyed.

Destruction was visible to those who understood like Canada's Department of Fisheries and Oceans scientists. Harris documents how DFO scientists had reported long-term impacts. They weren't just ignored, they were intimidated and gagged by bureaucrats and politicians with shorter-term interests. Harris writes, "The destruction of the northern cod was not a one-act play, but a pageant of greed that went on for decades before the curtain finally came down."

Professor Joseph Cummins, of the University of Western Ontario, described in 1998 the contamination of the ocean's thin surface layer. This is where downstream ends. It's the lowest point where our discharge into creeks or rivers and whatever leaches into the groundwater from our landfills or gardens will gather. This layer is the temporary repository of persistent organic pollutants or POPs like PCBs and DDT.

But nothing sits still. The ocean's surface is where nature's food-web begins. Microscopic phytoplankton assimilate carbon dioxide, water and sunlight to manufacture sugars, proteins, and fats. In succession, phytoplankton are eaten by zooplankton, arthropods, fish, birds, and mammals. Phytoplankton assimilate POPs too, but they're indigestible. Instead, they're concentrated exponentially through the food-web. Cummis gives the example of Mediterranean dolphins which carry 833 parts per million of PCBs in their blubber - nearly seventeen times the level requiring goods to be labelled and handled as toxic waste.

POPs aren't immediately lethal. They disrupt normal growth and weaken the immune system so ocean mammals die of diseases that were historically minor such as phocine distemper which has killed thousands of Atlantic seals. Dr. Cummins is not optimistic about the survival of marine mammals.

"Crab Wars" by William Sargent examines horseshoe crabs. They aren't crabs. They're distantly related to sow bugs and trilobites. There are fossilized horseshoe crabs 300 million old, older than the dinosaurs. However, their survival is now threatened perversely because they provide a unique benefit to humans which should guarantee their preservation. Horseshoe crabs have a chemically distinct blood, an artifact from pre-dinosaur days, that reacts instantly to the presence of fever-causing bacteria and there is no synthetic substitute.

Horseshoe crab blood is used to test vaccines, medicines, foods, cosmetics and hundreds of other things that need to be sterile. The blood is worth hundreds of dollars per litre, and it prevents untold human illnesses and deaths. Blood can be collected without killing crabs so a crab can be captured annually for a blood donation and then be returned to the sea. One crab generates thousands of dollars of revenue over its life. Sounds like a plan for enforced conservation, except the current practise is to harvest crabs, collect their blood once and then sell them for bait at pennies per pound. The crabs are now in decline from over-harvesting.