



Overfishing: a threat to marine biodiversity

Despite its crucial importance for the survival of humanity, marine biodiversity is in ever-greater danger, with the depletion of fisheries among biggest concerns

Fishing is central to the livelihood and food security of 200 million people, especially in the developing world, while one of five people on this planet depends on fish as the primary source of protein. According to UN agencies, aquaculture - the farming and stocking of aquatic organisms including fish, molluscs, crustaceans and aquatic plants - is growing more rapidly than all other animal food producing sectors. But amid facts and figures about aquaculture's soaring worldwide production rates, other, more sobering, statistics reveal that global main marine fish stocks are in jeopardy, increasingly pressured by overfishing and environmental degradation.

"Overfishing cannot continue," warned Nitin Desai, Secretary General of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, which took place in Johannesburg. "The depletion of fisheries poses a major threat to the food supply of millions of people." The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation calls for the establishment of Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), which many experts believe may hold the key to conserving and boosting fish stocks. Yet, according to the UN Environment Programme's (UNEP) World Conservation Monitoring Centre, in Cambridge, UK, less than one per cent of the world's oceans and seas are currently in MPAs.

The magnitude of the problem, however, is often overlooked, given the competing claims of deforestation, desertification, energy resource exploitation and other biodiversity depletion dilemmas. In part, there is often little focus on the rapid growth of demand for fish and fish products, both domestically and in export markets, leading to fish prices increasing faster than prices of meat. As a result, fisheries investments have become more attractive to both entrepreneurs and governments, much to the detriment of small-scale fishing and fishing communities all over the world. In the last decade, in the north Atlantic region, commercial fish populations of cod, hake, haddock and flounder have fallen by as much as 95%, prompting calls for urgent measures. Some are even recommending zero catches to allow for regeneration of stocks, much to the ire of the fishing industry.

According to a Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimate, over 70% of the world's fish species are either fully exploited or depleted. The dramatic increase of destructive fishing techniques worldwide destroys marine mammals and entire ecosystems. FAO reports that illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing worldwide appears to be increasing as fishermen seek to avoid stricter rules in many places in response to shrinking catches and declining fish stocks. Few, if any, developing countries and only a limited number of developed ones are on track to put into effect by this year the International Plan of Action to Prevent, Deter and Eliminate Unreported and Unregulated Fishing. Despite that fact that each region has its Regional Sea Convention, and some 108 governments and the European Commission have adopted the UNEP Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land based Activities, oceans are cleared at twice the rate of forests.

The Johannesburg forum stressed the importance of restoring depleted fisheries and acknowledged that sustainable fishing requires partnerships by and between governments, fishermen, communities and industry. It urged countries to ratify the Convention on the Law of the Sea and other instruments that promote maritime safety and protect the environment from marine pollution and environmental damage by ships. Only a multilateral approach can counterbalance the rate of depletion of the world's fisheries which has increased more than four times in the past 40 years.

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