Overfishing

Everyone knows about overfishing - but alarm bells just got even louder. A study reveals that catches are falling 3 times faster than UN estimates - not because we are choosing to catch less fish, but because they simply aren’t there. Over the course of a few decades, rampant fishing activities have led to 90 per cent of fish stocks being either fully fished or overfished. Reckless fishing activities are costing the global economy trillions of dollars, and are robbing our children of jobs and food for the future. Transitioning to sustainable fishing will boost the dwindling global catch feeding millions, raise fishing profits by $75 billion a year, and leave 36% more fish in the sea. What’s not to like?

It’s past time to get serious about ending overfishing and we know exactly how to stop it and regenerate Ocean life. It requires establishing more marine reserves, setting precautionary catch limits, stepping up monitoring and enforcement, fighting bycatch and discards, ending illegal fishing and stopping the perverse subsidies that fuel overfishing.

TALKING POINTS

- The UN estimates that worldwide, fish provides about 3 billion people with almost 20% of their intake of animal protein, and 4.3 billion people with about 15% of such protein.

- According to the FAO, 90% of fish stocks are now either fully fished (59.9%) or overfished at biologically unsustainable levels (33.1 per cent) . This is the highest proportion ever recorded.

- The number of underfished fish stocks have reached the lowest levels recorded, rapidly declining over the past decade from 24% to just 7%.

- According to the FAO, just one in three fish caught around the world never makes it to the plate, either being thrown back overboard or rotting before it can be eaten.

- "Fully exploited" is not necessarily undesirable if it is the result of an effective and precautionary management approach. However, it does indicate that fisheries are producing catches that are close to their maximum sustainable limits. This means that the maximum potential for these fisheries have been reached and a cautious approach to the further development of fisheries management is urgently needed to avoid these fisheries becoming over-exploited.
While there are controversies in some quarters over the “correct” figures on the status of the world’s fish stocks, the bottom line is that the ocean is in crisis and business as usual is exhausting its natural capital. It is in all of our long term interest to support precautionary, ecosystem based measures that focus on ensuring sustainability for decades to come.

Studies have shown that industrialized commercial fisheries typically reduce the biomass of the stocks they target by 80% within 15 years of exploitation (Myers and Worm 2003, Rapid worldwide depletion of predatory fish communities).

A report released by the University of British Columbia says that countries have been drastically underreporting the amount of fish that they have been catching. The researchers compared the UN FAO data with estimates from a broad range of sources from over 400 people worldwide, and found that the annual catches were much bigger than previously thought, and the fall in catches much steeper than officially recorded.

This misreporting has masked the fact that overfishing has caused catches to fall globally 3 times faster than estimated by the UN, not due to the fact that countries are fishing less but because they have systematically exhausted fisheries.

A FAO and World Bank report in 2009 estimated that poor fisheries management means that global marine fisheries are worth US$50 billion per year less than what they could be– a sum equivalent to more than half the value of the global seafood trade. The cumulative economic loss to the global economy of this mismanagement over the last three decades was estimated by the report’s authors to be in the order of two trillion dollars.

According to a recent updated study, global fisheries subsidies are estimated at about US$35 billion in 2009, with harmful subsidies constituting the highest categories at over US$20 billion.

Global bycatch may amount to as much as 40% of the world’s total fisheries catch, totalling 28.5 million metric tons per year (Davies et al. 2009, Defining and estimating global marine fisheries bycatch, Oceana 2014, Wasted Catch).

A 2°C warming is projected to cause a 30–70% increase in the fisheries yield of some high-latitude regions by 2055 (relative to 2005), a redistribution at mid latitudes, but a drop of 40%– 60% in the tropics and the Antarctic (medium confidence in the direction of trends in fisheries yields, low confidence in the magnitude of change).

Model projections suggest a potential loss of up to 13% to annual total fishery value in the US, or globally over 100 billion USD annually by 2100.
• Overcapacity - or too many boats chasing too few fish - of fishing fleets fueled by perverse subsidies significantly adds to overfishing, particularly for fisheries that are economically marginal and require those subsidies to break even or make a profit.

• Loss of key marine habitats- such as coral reefs and seagrass are also threatening the global fishing industry, according to new research.

**WHAT NEEDS TO HAPPEN?**

• To ensure recovery it is essential that development models promote sustaining marine life, in particular the huge financial and environmental benefits that can be gained from long-term protection, rather than short-term extraction.

• This means a reduction in fishing effort to ensure an increase in productivity and profit as well as to buffer the effects of climate change (http://www.stateoftheocean.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/07/IPSO-2019-Report-Final_web-PDF.pdf), the scrapping of harmful fisheries subsidies that promote overfishing and illegal, unregulated and unreported fishing, and protection measures to help rebuild fish stocks.

• An economic analysis in 2018 (Sala et al., 2018) concluded that if subsidies were removed, and adequate labour and human rights were enforced, most high seas fishing would be too uneconomic to survive.

• These subsidies can then be redirected to support the establishment of a global network of marine reserves which will also have many long-lasting benefits including more fish, bigger fish, and more types of fish both within the reserve but also outside due to the “spill-over” effect.

• Moratoria and bans need to be introduced for highly damaging activities such as bottom-trawling, deep-water gillnets and long-lining that results in very high levels of bycatch of marine animals such as seabirds, sharks and turtles.

• The World Trade Organization must agree in 2019 on how to get rid of harmful fisheries subsidies that contribute to overfishing and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Their goal should be to achieve SDG 14’s target to end perverse fisheries subsidies by 2020.

• The Ocean Prosperity Roadmap: Fisheries and Beyond explores how a transition to sustainable resource use – for example, by fishing smarter, not harder – can reduce poverty while increasing economic growth, food production, and fish populations.

• It’s also high time to eliminate illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. Learn how here.
Fisheries reform can yield triple bottom line gains in terms of greater economic profits, food security, and conservation benefits.

Key numbers from The State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2018

- Total global fish production in 2016: 171 million tonnes
  - Share of that from marine capture fisheries: 79.3 million tonnes
  - From freshwater capture fisheries: 11.6 million tonnes
  - From aquaculture: 80 million tonnes

- Amount of production consumed by humans as food: 151.2 million tonnes

- Amount of production lost to spoilage a/o thrown away after landing and prior to consumption: 27 percent of all landings.

- First-sale value of all fisheries and aquaculture production in 2016: $362 billion
  - Share of that from aquaculture: $232 billion

- Number of people employed in fisheries and aquaculture: 59.6 million
  - Percentage of those who are women: 14 percent
  - Region with the most fishers and fish farmers: Asia (85 percent of the total)

- Number of fishing vessels on the planet: 4.6 million
  - Largest fleet by region: Asia (3.3 million vessels, or 75% of the global fleet)

- Percent of global fish production that enters international trade: 35 percent

- Value of fish production exports: $143 billion

- Net export revenues for developing countries ($37 billion) exceeds revenues from their net exports of meat, tobacco, rice and sugar combined

- World's largest fish producer and exporter: China
• World's largest import market of fish and fish products: The European Union. Number two: The United States; Number three: Japan.

• Most unsustainable fisheries: Mediterranean and Black Sea (62.2 percent overfished stocks), the Southeast Pacific (61.5%), Southwest Atlantic (58.8%)

• Most sustainable fisheries: Eastern Central, Western Central, NE, NW and Southwest Pacific (all <17% of overfished stocks)