

Marine species stocks dropped 49pc in four decades, warns WWF

A new report by the conservation organization WWF warns that key fish stocks for human food security are alarmingly declining worldwide, and some of them are at risk of collapse. But it also reveals that many of the problems that threaten the ocean can be avoided and that there are solutions to turn the tide.

According to the report *Living Blue Planet*, the essential species for commercial fishing and subsistence -- and therefore for food supply worldwide -- may be experiencing the largest declines known so far. In fact, the study highlights the severe drop in commercial fish stocks, and the dramatic loss of 74 per cent of the fish family in existence for consumption that includes tuna, mackerel and bonito.

"We are catching fish in such a way we could exhaust a source of food that is vital for man and an essential economic engine. Overfishing, destruction of marine habitats and climate change have dire consequences for the entire human population. Without disregarding that the poorest communities that depend on the sea are those which would be affected more quickly and more severely," argues Marco Lambertini, WWF International general director.

"We publish this report urgently to provide the most current picture of the ocean status," explains Lambertini. "In a single generation, human activity has seriously damaged the ocean by catching fish faster than they can reproduce while their feeding zones are being destroyed. Profound changes are needed to ensure abundant marine life for future generations."

The study looked at 5,829 populations of 1,234 species, so there is almost twice as much information as in previous studies, and it concludes that fish stocks experienced a decline of 49 per cent between 1970 and 2012.

While overexploitation is identified as the greatest threat to ocean biodiversity, the study emphasizes that climate change is causing faster changes in the ocean than at any time in millions of years. The rising temperatures and acidification caused by carbon dioxide exacerbate the negative impacts of overfishing and other major threats, including habitat degradation and pollution.

Research also shows that coral reefs and grasslands worldwide could be lost by 2050 as a result of climate change. With over 25 per cent of all marine species living in coral reefs and some 850 million people directly benefitting from their economic, social and cultural services, the loss of coral reefs would be a catastrophic extinction with dramatic consequences in communities.

"The good news is that there are solutions and we know what to do. The ocean is a renewable resource that can cater to future generations if we address these pressures effectively," says Lambertini.

"If we live within sustainable limits, the ocean will contribute to food security, to create livelihoods, economies and our natural systems. The equation is simple. We must seize this opportunity to support the ocean and reverse the damage as we can".

The WWF report details opportunities for governments, businesses and communities in order to ensure a living ocean. Among these, important measures are highlighted to preserve ocean resources and rebuild the natural marine capital, consuming responsibly and prioritizing sustainability.

Earlier this year, an independent study by WWF found that every dollar invested to create marine protected areas could produce three-folded benefits through factors such as employment, protection of the coast, and fishing. That analysis showed that increasing the protection of critical habitats could produce net benefits of between USD 490,000 million and USD 920,000 million between 2015 and 2050.

WWF believes it is essential for both the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development that governments will agree on this month as the UN climate summit in Paris to address issues such as habitat destruction, overfishing, illegal fishing and marine pollution.

According to the report, "the current international commitments are far from what is necessary to stop warming and acidification levels, catastrophic problems for ocean systems and for all the people who depend on them."

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