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Seabirds populations have declined 70% in the past 50 years

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Seabird populations have declined 70% in the past 50 years as they compete with the fishing industry for food

Seabirds are at risk due to the competition they face from the fishing industry for food, a new study has claimed.

There has been a 70 per cent decline in seabird populations over seven decades due to a combination of the fishing industry, pollution and habitat destruction.

Scientists from the University of Aberdeen looked at two timeframes – 1970 to 1989 and 1990 to 2010.

They assessed the degree of competition seabirds faced for their favourite foods – species such as anchovy, sardines, mackerel, squid, krill and crustaceans.

The team then estimated the annual consumption of these species for 276 different types of seabird species.

They based this on population counts and models, which they compared to annual catches by fishing boats recorded in the Sea Around Us world database.

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Experts found that the total annual seabird consumption decreased from 70 to 57 millions of tonnes between 1970 to 1990 and 1990 to 2010.

Annual fishery catches increased from 59 to 65 million tonnes over the same period.

Dr Aurore Ponchon, who co-led the study, said: 'Our research shows, that despite the decline of the world seabird community between 1970 to 1989 and 1990 to 2010, competition with fisheries remained sustained.

'This competition was even enhanced in almost half the oceans. This enhanced competition.

'In addition to other factors such as pollution, predation by invasive species on chicks, the destruction and changes in their habitat by human activities and environmental changes caused by climate change, puts seabirds at risk, making them the most threatened bird group, with a 70 per cent decline over the past seven decades.

'This study calls for an improved management of the world's fisheries to alleviate competition pressure on seabird populations.'

The study, published in , also involved scientists from the University of British Columbia and the French National Centre for scientific research.

The findings come just weeks after a shock report found the percentage of seabirds with plastic in their stomach has increased to 90 per cent from 5 per cent in 1960.

Plastic pollution is one of the worst ways man is adversely affecting the environment.

Global wildlife populations have fallen by 60 per cent since 1970 as humans overuse natural resources, driving climate change and pollution.

Only a quarter of the world's land area is free from the impacts of human activity and by 2050 that will have fallen to just a tenth, the Living Planet Report 2018 says.

From hedgehogs and puffins to elephants, rhinos, polar bears and orangutans, wildlife is declining – driven by habitat loss, poaching, pollution and higher temperatures, according to the report by the Zoological Society of London and the WWF.

WHAT ARE MICROPLASTICS AND HOW DO THEY GET INTO OUR WATERWAYS?

Microplastics are plastic particles measuring less than five millimetres (0.2 inches).

They have hit the headlines over recent years, as improper disposal has resulted in tonnes of waste making its way into the ocean.

Each year, tonnes of plastic waste fails to get recycled and dealt with correctly, which can mean they end up in marine ecosystems.

Although it's unclear exactly how they end up in the water, microplastics may enter through simple everyday wear and tear of clothing and carpets.

Tumble dryers may also be a source, particularly if they have a vent to the open air.

Plastics don't break down for thousands of years and it is estimated that there are already millions of items of plastic waste in the oceans. This number is expected to rise.

Studies have also revealed 700,000 plastic fibres could be released into the atmosphere with every washing machine cycle.

Current water systems are unable to effectively filter out all microplastic contamination, due to the varying size of particles.

The amount of plastic rubbish in the world's oceans will outweigh fish by 2050 unless the world takes drastic action to further recycle, a report released in 2016 revealed.

More than 80 per cent of the world's tap water is contaminated with plastic, research published in September 2017 revealed.

The US has the highest contamination rate at 93 per cent, followed by Lebanon and India, experts from the University of Minnesota found.

France, Germany and the UK have the lowest levels, however, they still come in at 72 per cent.

Overall, 83 per cent of water samples from dozens of nations around the world contain microplastics.

Scientists warn microplastics are so small they could penetrate organs.

Bottled water may not be a safer alternative, as scientists have found contaminated samples.

Creatures of all shapes and sizes have been found to have consumed the plastics, whether directly or indirectly.

Previous research has also revealed microplastics absorb toxic chemicals, which are then released in the gut of animals.

Populations of more than 4,000 species of mammals, reptiles, birds, fish and amphibians have declined by an average of 60 per cent between 1970 and 2014.

Among the alarming findings was work from the Commonwealth and Scientific Research Organisation which showed that of 186 species of seabirds 90 per cent have plastic in their stomachs, a figure projected to rise to 99 per cent by 2050.

Species which live in fresh water habitats, such as frogs and river fish, have seen global population falls of 83 per cent. Tropical areas have experienced the worst declines, with an 89 per cent fall in populations monitored in Latin America and the Caribbean since 1970.

Marco Lambertini, director general of the WWF, said: 'Our planet is at a crossroads and we have the opportunity to decide the path ahead. The astonishing decline in wildlife populations is a grim reminder and perhaps the ultimate indicator of the pressure we exert on the planet.'

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