Treating Fish as a Public Health Asset, Not a Commodity, Is Key to Food Security

Mark B.  Aug 05, 2020 10:10 AM EDT

One of the answers for food security depends on the attitude towards fish--treating them as a domestic public health asset instead of a commodity--according to a new study.

The latest paper from members of the research initiative Sea Around Us - Indian Ocean and the Sea Around Us global initiative from the University of British Columbia inquires about the current policies regarding the fishing industry.

A Change in Fishing Policies Could Affect Food Security

"Fish constitutes a major component of the diet of more than 3 billion people around the world. In low-income countries, in particular, small-scale fisheries are the main source of nutrients for over a billion people," Gabriel Vianna said. Vianna is the lead author of the study and works as a research fellow with the Indian Ocean chapter of Sea Around Us.

In their report, titled Fisheries and Policy Implications for Human Nutrition published in the latest Current Environmental Health Reports, researchers compiled evidence relating existing fisheries policy to food and nutrient security.

The study noted that since the middle of the 1990s, global fishing hauls have been declining by approximately one percent. Overfishing is seen as the main contributing factor in this decline. The annual one percent translates to about one million tons of fish in hauls all over the world.

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Evidence suggests that unless fisheries-related policies that control industrial exploitation of these natural resources are put into place, the reduction trend will only continue.

It is important that fisheries policies drift away from the current export-oriented, profit-maximizing focus. https://t.co/vuqUCcImgX pic.twitter.com/ndlNPYz3j6 — Sea Around Us (@SeaAroundUs)

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An Urgent Concern

Dirk Zeller, study co-author and director of Sea Around Us - Indian Ocean, noted the urgency of the matter. "If not addressed, the resultant loss in biomass due to overfishing will translate into a shortage of fatty acids and essential micronutrients, affecting more than 10 percent of the global population, with a disproportionately high impact in tropical low- and middle-income countries." He added that this practice, combined with climate change and the challenges of "artisanal and subsistence fisheries," are considerable concerns to be addressed.

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However, other practices, such as the deep structural improvements in effective fisheries management, as done in various parts of the world, work to improve global catch. These improvements can result in a potential increase, and in turn, help solve nutritional shortfalls.

In March 2019, a research team led by the University of Western Australia (UWA) and Stanford University established that eco-labels on seafood encourage consumers to purchase sustainably-sourced products. This, in turn, encourages fishers to turn to more sustainable processes.

Observing 67 fisheries from 50 countries, the research team examined the relationship between implementing improvement efforts and success.

"Interestingly, and contrary to popular opinion, the level of success didn't come from how well-financed the fisheries were or their size, with fisheries in developing countries and smaller catches often carrying out effective improvement initiatives," said Dr. Kendra Travaille. She is the lead researcher of the study and a member of the UWA Oceans Institute and School of Biological Sciences.

"The research also highlights the power we have as consumers in ensuring a sustainable and high standard of fishery practices," Dr. Travaille added. It supports the relationship between consumers who direct industrial fisheries, who must adapt to work towards nutrition and food security in their respective countries.