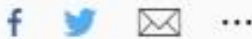




Global overfishing is starving penguins and other seabirds, says B.C. study

By **WANYEE LI** StarMetro Vancouver
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VANCOUVER—Birds who live much of their lives at sea are starving to death because they can't compete with humanity's insatiable appetite for seafood, according to a new global study.

Seabirds, as an entire species group, could go extinct in the next 50 years if the fishing industry does not adopt more sustainable practices, said Deng Palomares, co-author of the study and project manager for the Sea Around Us program at the University of British Columbia.



The Vancouver Aquarium has six endangered African penguins. (WANYEE LI / STARMETRO)

“These changes will happen within a lifetime if we don’t do anything about it,” she said. “This is urgent.”

Some species, like the endangered African penguin — which has experienced a 95 per cent population decline since the early 1900s — could become extinct even earlier than that.

Deng and a team of researchers first mapped out what a billion different seabirds eat and how much they eat. Then they compared that data to the intake of fisheries in 273 countries.

The resulting paper, published in *Current Biology*, is the first of its kind to compare seabird consumption of fish and industrial fishery intake on a global scale.

What the researchers found shows birds cannot compete with industrial fisheries.

In the 40 years between 1970 and 2010, seabirds’ annual fish consumption has decreased from 70 to 57 million tonnes. In contrast, industrial fisheries have increased their annual catches of potential seabird prey from 59 million tonnes in the 1970s to 65 million tonnes in recent years.

“In that competition, the seabirds are losing out to fisheries,” said David Grémillet, lead author of the study and senior scientist in France’s National Centre for Scientific Research.

Seabirds and other marine wildlife are also dealing with threats from plastic and chemical pollution. Nearly 40 per cent of all seabirds are listed as threatened and almost half are seeing population decline, said Grémillet.

The world has already lost a quarter of its penguin population. The situation is especially dire for the endangered African penguin.

Sardines make up a significant portion of African penguins' diet but sardines are being drastically overfished in South Africa, where African penguins live, said Grémillet.

The problem is so dire that conservationists have set up a Species Survival Plan with the aim of maintaining a viable population in zoos and aquariums in case the birds go extinct in the wild.

The Vancouver Aquarium contributes to that plan by housing six African penguins.

“(The Species Survival Plan) works to figure out the best genetics for the population to make sure there is a diverse genetic population in case African penguins completely disappear, that we would have animals to hopefully reintroduce into the wild,” said Kristi Heffron, senior marine mammal trainer at the Vancouver Aquarium.

The aquarium encourages people to eat sustainably caught seafood in order to save endangered marine animals like the penguins.

But Grémillet and Palomares said that won't be enough if governments and fishing industries do not act quickly.

Policy-makers around the world need to create more protected marine areas where fishing is banned outright, and governments need to ensure fishing quotas are properly enforced, said Grémillet.

If the fishing industry switches to more sustainable practices, there would be more than enough fish in the world, he added.

“If we manage ocean fisheries well, we could feed twice as many people as we currently feed with seafood,” he said.

“What we want to do is raise the profile for global ocean conservation, not only for seabirds.”

Wanyee Li is a Vancouver-based reporter covering courts, wildlife conservation and new technology. Follow her on Twitter: [@wanyeelii](https://twitter.com/wanyeelii)

Link: https://www.thestar.com/vancouver/2018/12/06/global-overfishing-is-starving-penguins-and-other-seabirds-says-bc-study.html?fbclid=IwAR09Sbg7vAFGAlakvwmPOF_QwyCsB0UyR9hvHLcJd96FS_BuMW2q7kj5uoc