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Far-reaching Effects of Overfishing

Deep in the wilds of Ghana's Mole National Park, the watering hole is eerily quiet. Most of the large predators and their prey have vanished. For many local children, it's been another day spent out of school, staving off raids from growing numbers of aggressive baboons. Out on the coast, a group of exhausted Ghanaian fishermen pull their boats to shore with nothing but empty nets to show for their efforts.

Biologist [Justin Brashares](#) and his colleagues have uncovered a surprising link between all these disturbing events—a link that eventually leads far from the African coast. “We found when fish supply was low, Ghanaians had to turn to hunting and selling wildlife on land to meet their food and economic needs,” states Brashares. After sifting through 30 years of meticulously collected data from the Ghana Wildlife Division, Brashares also suspects that all that bushmeat hunting is what removed the baboons' main predators. Without predators, the baboons multiplied into an increasingly unruly and audacious mob bold enough to steal food from the villagers. But Brashares still had two glaring questions: Why were the fishermen's nets empty, and where did all the fish go?

What has been the biggest surprise in your life as a scientist?

Brashares: People believe you must be smart if the title "Professor" precedes your name. Trust me, it is not true!

Read Justin Brashares' [full Q&A](#) »

What would you recommend for students wanting to pursue a similar career?

Sumaila: Be focused, work hard, share with colleagues and never give up.

Read Ussif Rashid Sumaila's [full Q&A](#) »



agressive baboons

glimpses of tuna and swordfish instead of looking to the deep blue sea. What's behind this wholesale demise? According to Brashares, government subsidies play a large part. Wealthy nations, mainly in Asia and Europe, subsidize their commercial fishing fleets to the tune of \$35 billion dollars annually, paying both for new ships and fuel costs. The European Union (EU) countries alone account for nearly 10


These same questions are on the minds of many as researchers and fishers alike confront dwindling fish supplies worldwide. By some accounts 90 percent of our large predatory fish species have vanished since the 1950s and nearly one-third of our world fisheries are struggling. By 2050, our nine-billion-strong populace may be watching old movies to catch

percent of these government subsidies—handouts that fuel the majority of foreign fleets fishing off West Africa. According to African-born bioeconomist [Rashid Sumaila](#), if the EU stopped supplying handouts, then companies would have to pay the real cost of operating in distant waters and it simply wouldn't make economic sense to send fleets so far south.

The problem with subsidies is clear. The total elimination of them, however, remains controversial since jobs will be lost in the process. According to Sumaila, programs that provide education and career alternatives for fishermen need to work hand-in-hand with subsidy reductions. And as populations continue to rise, better education programs are needed in Ghana and beyond to ensure more sustainable food-gathering practices are adopted both on land and at sea. Sumaila cautions that all these actions will help but not solve everything. Such a multipronged issue as overfishing merits an equally multipronged solution, including the establishment of more [marine protected areas](#) as well as better fisheries management within West African waters. “If we decide to take action now,” states Sumaila, “there are huge chances fish will come back and we can move on to a more prosperous future.” And we can help. Here's how:



Ghana fisheries

- Make wise selections at the market. Buy sustainable seafood by choosing fish certified by the Marine Stewardship Council. Also visit [our interactive market](#).
- Support policies that encourage reductions of fishing subsidies and promote education.
- Stay informed about the issues. Consult [The Sea Around Us Project](#)  for updates on the state of the world fisheries and upcoming regulatory decisions.

For more ways to help visit: [What can we do?](#)

For more on fishing subsidies and solutions see [Rashid Sumaila's video interview](#).

References

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