

Consumer campaigns don't save endangered fish: report

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Consumer campaigns to protect threatened fish species have failed, researchers warned Tuesday in a report underscoring the need for alternative ways to save threatened marine species.

The report suggested that government and consumers make big wholesalers and retailers stop selling threatened fish species; that farmers and agricultural feed makers stop using fishmeal for cheap protein; that national subsidies for fishing industries be axed; and that international standards be set for "sustainable" seafood labels.

"Seafood supply from capture sheries is decreasing and ... marine fisheries are unsustainable," noted the report by researchers at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre here.

More than a third of fish caught worldwide is used to feed factory-farmed animals, they said.

"Currently, 30 million tonnes of fish (36 percent of world fisheries catch) are ground up each year into fishmeal and oil, mostly to feed farmed fish, chicken and pigs."

"Decreasing the amount of fish used for the production of animal feed should be a top priority of the sustainable-seafood movement," said the report. "Pigs and chickens alone consume six and two times the amount of seafood as US and Japanese consumers."

"For pigs and chickens, we don't need to be feeding them fishmeal," co-author Jennifer Jacquet told AFP. "We should feed them what they were meant to eat."

The food industry uses fishmeal as a "cheap protein source" to achieve fast growth rates in food animals, she said, "but with the oceans as stressed as they are, that's not going to work for a long term plan."

Programs aimed at helping consumers choose sustainable fish are popular with consumers and businesses in western countries, and may raise awareness, noted the report.

But the programs have failed to reach their goals and are beset by "consumer confusion, lack of traceability and a lack of demonstrably improved conservation status for the fish that are meant to be protected," it said.

The report examined the impact of consumer guides to ocean-friendly seafood, and noted that one of the first such programs, wallet cards produced by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California, had resulted in no overall change in the market and no decrease in fishing pressures on the at-risk species it targeted.

Because supermarkets sell 60 percent of seafood in Canada and 50 percent in the United States, said Jacquet, efforts should shift from consumer-choice programs to "targeting mega supermarket chains such as Walmart, Whole Foods and Loblaw through a combination of positive and negative publicity campaigns."

The report was published online Tuesday in the science journal Oryx: The International Journal of Conservation.

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