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Summary

A fisheries expert visiting the UAE will today tell experts that the situation facing the world's fisheries is even more dire than calamitous predictions made five years ago.

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Global fish supplies 'will disappear in four decades'

Vesela Todorova

Last Updated: May 1, 2011



ABU DHABI // Global fish stocks will be exhausted by the middle of the century if current rates of fishing are maintained, a leading fisheries expert has warned.

Ussif Rashid Sumaila, an associate professor of economics at the University of British Columbia, Canada, will tell an audience at New York University Abu Dhabi today that the situation facing the world's fisheries is even more dire than calamitous predictions made five years ago.

Dr Sumaila, who is also director of his university's fisheries centre, will join a panel of local and international experts in a series of lectures at universities and schools in the capital, Dubai and Sharjah. The events are being staged by the volunteer group Global Ocean.

The documentary End of the Line, which explores threats to the world's fish resources, will also be screened.

"In 2006, a study published by a colleague suggested that by 2048 we would be in trouble," he said. "Most of the world's fisheries would have crashed."

The estimates were that by midcentury the global fish catch would be just 10 per cent of average annual catch since 1950. The study sparked heated debate within the fishing industry, with some researchers questioning the findings because they were so alarming.

Yet Dr Sumaila believes the situation is even more dire than had been predicted. "I think that if we do not do something, this is an optimistic date," he said.

At least 63 per cent of global stock was overfished. The current fishing effort - based on the number of fishermen at sea and how long they work to meet the demand for fish - is up to three times the standard of what is generally considered sustainable fishing.

The UAE has its own problems, with species such as hamour being pushed to almost total depletion. Numbers of the fish declined by 80 per cent between 1978 and 2001-2002, according to the Environment Agency-Abu

Dhabi (EAD).

Demand for the popular fish combined with a fast-growing fishing fleet have contributed to the problem, Dr Thabit Zahran al Abdessalaam, director of the

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biodiversity sector at the Environment Agency-Abu Dhabi, said.

Globally, demand for fish had increased along with the trade in fish products, Dr Sumaila said. Fish was one of the most widely traded food commodities, with 60 per cent of the global catch traded across borders. In comparison, only 5 per cent of the world's rice crop was traded.

Subsidies remain a key

issue.

"I divide the subsidies into the good, the bad and the ugly,"

Since 1999 he has been compiling a database of government spending to help the fishing industry. Global subsidies were worth US\$27 billion (Dh98.9bn) a year, he said. By comparison, the value of fish caught and brought to market is \$85bn a year.

The main reasons for subsidies were social. "A lot of the fishing communities are poor, so governments want to help them," he said.

Worldwide, about \$8bn was spent annually on research, fisheries monitoring and enforcement of legislation. These are the good subsidies, and Dr Sumaila would like to see them increase.

On the other hand, subsidising operational costs, such as helping fishermen with fuel costs, can have a negative effect.

The UAE has about 22,000 fishermen, according to the Ministry of Environment and Water. Last year, to help poor local fishermen, the ministry announced annual fuel subsidies worth Dh3.8 million. Each fishermen is given between Dh500 and Dh800 a month.

The ministry already supplies some fishermen with boat engines and offers help to those who have no other jobs and depend on the industry to support their families.

Dr al Abdessalaam said that while offering subsidies was a popular measure, it did a disservice to fishermen in the long term. Often, he said, subsidies were needed because the fishery could no longer sustain a certain level of fishing. Subsidies perpetuated a level of fishing effort that otherwise would have diminished.

"Subsidies can send the fishery into extinction," he said.

Dr Sumaila said money would be better spent creating job opportunities for poor fishermen. Consumers could also contribute to sustainable fishing by buying fish that had been caught responsibly. [Next page](#)

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