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## Too many boats, not enough fish

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When overfishing is occurring, adding more boats to an existing fishery will actually make the situation worse, not better.

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**In the article by Ramesh Matthew in Gulf Times on December 9, the fish shortage in Qatar was attributed to the lack of sufficient numbers of fishing boats and crew to catch enough fish to supply the local market. We would like to respectfully disagree with this claim.**

**According to FAO data, Qatari fisheries catch peaked above 17,000 tonnes per year in 2008 and has declined by over 36 % through 2012, the most recent year for which landings are available. This decline, however, is not due to insufficient fishing effort, i.e., to an insufficient number of fishing vessels being deployed. Rather, it is due to too many fishing vessels having depleted the fish stocks around Qatar, with the effect that these stocks cannot produce as much fish as they did before. Fish populations can replenish themselves naturally over time. However, when there are too many people catching too many fish then the fish population, or the weight or number of fish that can be caught will decline.**

**When overfishing is occurring, adding more boats to an existing fishery will actually make the situation worse, not better. First, if more boats are fishing, there is more pressure on the small number of fish that are available to be caught, and the fish are less likely to be able to replenish their numbers. Also, from an economic point of view, less income will be made by each boat if there are less fish available and more boats. With more boats, the fishery becomes less efficient, more fuel is wasted, and more fishermen are exposed to potential injury.**

**When a fishery is just beginning, adding more vessels can increase catches. However, when a fishery is fully developed, adding more vessels will paradoxically not only reduce catches, but destroy the livelihood of those who are already fishing.**

**One way to have more fish in the market over the long-term, is to reduce the number of boats fishing boats in the short term. Though this can be economically painful initially, if there are fewer boats fishing, less fish will be caught and the fish populations can rebuild. Once fish numbers are back to a high (not overfished) level, then perhaps more boats could be allowed into the fishery.**

**A recent study showed that about 12 years after rebuilding begins, the economic benefits will exceed the cost. This study also found that on a global basis, the economic value of rebuilt fisheries world-wide would increase by over \$67bn a year from current value.**

**Before suggesting that more boats should be deployed, one must find out the status of the fish stocks, i.e., perform stock assessments. Stock assessments allow the fishing effort, e.g., the number of vessels to be adjusted to the natural productivity of given fishing grounds, for all fisheries of the world.**

**Stock assessments are thus an important component of fisheries management, and we hope that Qatar and the other Gulf countries will devote more attention to this issue. It is the only way to ensure the sustainability of the fisheries, i.e., the continuation of their contribution to the food security Qatar and the other Gulf countries.**

**Another problem is that in the Gulf, many countries lie in close proximity to one another, and the activities of one country's fisheries sector will impact on an adjacent countries. Many fish species are migratory and can swim between the territorial waters of several countries. So even if there are restrictions on fishing in Qatar and there are not similar restrictions in adjacent countries, then overfishing will continue in the Gulf. Therefore, fisheries management needs to be considered and preferably implemented on a Gulf-wide basis.**

**Restoring fisheries wealth to the Gulf is a much simpler, but perhaps politically more difficult way to enhance domestic food security compared to other options such as purchasing and cultivating agricultural land in foreign countries or developing domestic intensive food production systems. The Center for Sustainable Development is a newly created centre at Qatar University's College of Arts and Sciences that is focused on addressing pressing issues of sustainable development of Qatar and the Gulf region. Researchers at the Center are embarking on a collaboration with the University of British Columbia (UBC), to assess the status of the fisheries of the Gulf, and make recommendations as to how to better manage fisheries.**

**UBC, which is home to one of the world's leading fisheries research departments, completed an initial review of the fisheries of the Arabian Gulf, and found that most Gulf countries had under-reported their fishery landings. It's our hope that this effort will establish new partnerships with relevant stakeholders and interested parties to allow for a science-based approach to restore the fisheries wealth of Qatar and the Gulf.**

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