

## Global fisheries sustainability declines as FAO calls for stronger action against overfishing

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The sustainability of the world's fisheries continues to face mounting challenges, according to the latest State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture report released by the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) at the Our Ocean Conference in Mombasa. The assessment, which applies a broader and more comprehensive methodology than previous editions, presents a detailed picture of global fishery resources and highlights both encouraging examples of effective management and alarming signs of persistent overfishing.

The report reveals that the proportion of fish stocks classified as biologically sustainable has declined to 62.4 per cent, down from 64.5 per cent reported in the previous assessment. The findings underscore the continued threat posed by overfishing to marine biodiversity, coastal livelihoods and long-term food security.

At the same time, the report demonstrates that fisheries operating under robust, science-based management systems continue to perform significantly better than those lacking effective governance. Regions with strong management frameworks have maintained healthy fish stocks and sustainable harvest levels, reinforcing the critical role of evidence-based fisheries management in safeguarding marine resources.

Aquatic foods are becoming increasingly important within the global food system. According to the report, wild-caught fisheries and aquaculture products now provide at least one-fifth of animal protein consumption for approximately 3.1 billion people worldwide. Meanwhile, global trade in aquatic animal products has reached an estimated \$184 billion, placing it on par with the international trade value of terrestrial meat products.

The report identifies notable regional differences in fisheries sustainability. Antarctic fisheries continue to set the global benchmark, with 100 per cent of assessed stocks classified as biologically sustainable. Strong sustainability performances were also recorded in the Northeast Pacific and Southwest Pacific, where 89.3 per cent and 86.8 per cent of assessed fish stocks, respectively, remain within biologically sustainable levels.

However, the findings also expose regions facing significant sustainability challenges. The Eastern Central Atlantic recorded only 47.1 per cent of assessed stocks as biologically sustainable, while the Mediterranean and Black Sea continue to report some of the highest levels of overexploitation globally, with just 45.7 per cent of fish stocks considered sustainable.

Despite the decline in overall sustainability indicators, the report offers a more encouraging perspective when fish stocks are measured by landing volumes. Approximately 72.6 per cent of assessed fish landings in 2023 originated from sustainably managed stocks, suggesting that many of the world's largest and most commercially significant fisheries continue to benefit from stronger management systems and more effective harvest controls.

Commenting on the findings, Michael Marriott, Programme Director for Africa, Middle East and South Asia (AMESA) at the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), emphasized that the report illustrates both the scale of the challenge and the effectiveness of proven solutions.

The FAO's latest assessment reinforces a reality the global seafood sector can no longer afford to ignore: overfishing remains one of the most significant threats to ocean health, food security and coastal livelihoods. The report demonstrates that where science-based fisheries management is implemented consistently, fish stocks remain healthy and productive. Conversely, regions lacking effective governance continue to witness declining sustainability outcomes.

He noted that the findings also provide strong evidence that sustainable fisheries management delivers measurable results when supported by robust stock assessments, science-based catch limits, effective monitoring systems and action against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing.

Encouragingly, the data also provides evidence that sustainable fisheries management delivers measurable results. The challenge now is scaling proven solutions—including robust stock assessments, science-driven catch limits, stronger monitoring systems and decisive action against illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing—to regions where pressures on marine resources remain acute.

Marriott further stressed that protecting fisheries has become an economic and food-security imperative as global dependence on aquatic foods continues to rise.

As aquatic foods assume a more central role in feeding a growing global population, protecting fishery resources is no longer solely an environmental imperative; it is an economic and food-security necessity. Governments, industry, scientists, civil society and consumers must work collectively to ensure that sustainable fisheries management becomes the global norm rather than the exception.

The FAO report arrives amid growing concerns over climate variability, ecosystem degradation and increasing pressure on marine resources. These factors are amplifying the urgency for governments, fisheries managers, industry stakeholders and conservation organisations to accelerate the adoption of science-based management practices capable of preserving fish stocks while maintaining economic viability.

While the latest assessment highlights a continued decline in the overall proportion of sustainable fish stocks, it also reinforces a critical lesson: fisheries governed through rigorous science, transparent oversight and long-term stewardship continue to outperform those operating without adequate management frameworks. As demand for aquatic foods rises globally, extending these proven approaches to vulnerable fisheries may prove decisive in securing both ocean health and global food security in the decades ahead.