Report supports shutdown of all high seas fisheries

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UBC's Rashid Sumaila argues that the high seas should be closed to all fishing. Credit: Martin Dee

Fish and aquatic life living in the high seas are more valuable as a carbon sink than as food and should be better protected, according to research from the University of British Columbia.

The study found fish and aquatic life remove 1.5 billion tonnes of carbon dioxide from the atmosphere every year, a service valued at about $148 billion US. This dwarfs the $16 billion US paid for 10 million tonnes of fish caught on the high seas annually.

"Countries around the world are struggling to find cost effective ways to

reduce their carbon emissions," says Rashid Sumaila, director of the UBC Fisheries Economics Research Unit. "We've found that the high seas are a natural system that is doing a good job of it for free."

Sumaila helped calculate the economic value of the carbon stored by life in the high seas by applying prices—which include the benefits of mitigating the costs of climate change—to the annual quantity of carbon absorbed.

The report argues that the high seas—defined as an area more than 200 nautical miles from any coast and outside of national jurisdiction—should be closed to all fishing as only one per cent of fish caught annually are exclusively found there.

"Keeping fish in the high seas gives us more value than catching them," says Sumaila. "If we lose the life in the high seas, we'll have to find another way to reduce emissions at a much higher cost."

Provided by University of British Columbia