

Aquaculture drives aquatic food yields to new high

June 29 2022, by Marlowe HOOD



On average, people worldwide consume over 20 kilos (44 pounds) of aquatic foods per year today, more than double the amount 50 years ago.

The production of wild and farm-raised fish, shellfish and algae reached record levels in 2020, and future increases could be vital to fighting

world hunger, the Food and Agriculture Organization said Wednesday.

Driven by sustained growth in aquaculture, [global fisheries](#) and aquatic farming together hauled in 214 million tonnes, the UN agency said in a report.

The total first-sale value of 2020 production topped \$400 million, with \$265 million coming from aquaculture, a sector poised for further expansion.

These trend lines are good news for a world facing price hikes and [food shortages](#) due to the war in Ukraine, disrupted supply chains, and inflation.

"The growth of fisheries and aquaculture is vital in our efforts to end global hunger and malnutrition," said FAO director Qu Dongyu.

But overfished oceans, [climate change](#) and pollution—if left unaddressed—could threaten that potential, the UN agency warned.

"Aquaculture growth has often occurred at the expense of the environment," Qu noted.

Many shrimp farms in Vietnam, China and Cambodia, for example, have displaced mangrove forests that are nurseries for marine life and critical barriers against storm surges.

Climate change poses additional challenges, experts say.

"Warming waters will create environments where there's more likelihood of bacterial disease," said Josh Madeira, director of fisheries and aquaculture policy at the Monterey Bay Aquarium.

That means a sector already highly reliant on antibiotics will likely become even more so, he told AFP.

Production of aquatic animals in 2020—totalling 178 million tonnes—was evenly divided between fisheries and aquaculture, according to the FAO report.

The remaining 36 million tonnes was algae production.



China remains by far the top fisheries producer, followed by Indonesia, Peru, Russia, the United States and Vietnam.

Overfished stocks

Yields of fish, shrimp and other shellfish destined for [human consumption](#) are more than 60 percent higher than during the 1990s, far outpacing [population growth](#), according to the report, released during the UN Ocean Conference in Lisbon.

On average, people worldwide consume over 20 kilos (44 pounds) of aquatic foods per year today, more than double the amount 50 years ago.

Globally, 17 percent of the protein consumed by humans comes from aquatic sources. In many Asian and African countries, that figure rises to more than 50 percent.

Wild and farmed food from the seas and [inland waters](#) are also a critical source of essential omega-3 fatty acids and micronutrients, recent research has shown.

"Aquatic foods are increasingly recognised for their key role in food security and nutrition," Qu said.

Nearly 90 percent of aquatic animal production is for human consumption, with the rest destined for non-food uses such as fishmeal and fish oil.

Asian countries were the source of 70 percent of the world's fisheries and aquaculture of aquatic animals in 2020.

China remains by far the top fisheries producer, followed by Indonesia, Peru, Russia, the United States and Vietnam.

So-called capture fisheries of commercial species in the wild—including tuna, cod, salmon and especially anchoveta—dropped by four percent in 2020 compared to the average of the previous three years.

Part of the drop can be attributed to COVID-related disruptions, but long-term decline is due to the pressures of overfishing, experts say.

Catch levels peaked in the mid-1990s, and have—with fluctuations—stagnated since then.

"The FAO estimates that 34 percent of caught fish come from overfished stocks," University of British Columbia economist and fisheries expert Rashid Sumaila told AFP.

"But they are very conservative," he added. "Independent studies put that figure at 50 percent."

Aggravating the problem is some \$34 billion dollars annually in government subsidies.

Earlier this month, the World Trade Organization (WTO) took preliminary steps to reduce these handouts to industry, but experts say the measures will have limited effect and take years to implement.

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