

• Silvia Lazzaris

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July 06, 2021



By

Silvia Lazzaris

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UNSUSTAINABLE FISHING: THE SITUATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

Almost all fishing is unsustainable and the only way out is to stop eating fish - these are the conclusions drawn by *Seaspiracy*, the latest Netflix documentary on fishing. The documentary was accused of simplism and sensationalism not only by the fishing industry, but also by the scientific community and even some of its interviewees.¹ The producers cited obsolete sources, excluded important data, and reported on specific situations - allegedly the worst in the sector - to draw conclusions about the global situation.² But are Seaspiracy's mistakes bad enough to delegitimise its message?



WHY WE CAN'T OVERLOOK SEASPIRACY'S MISTAKES

Details are important, and fact-checking misleading narratives is necessary for the proper functioning of our democracies. Those who argue that the documentary's mistakes can be overlooked because of the importance of its message forget that, on other occasions, distorting narratives could be used to support causes we don't approve of. We can protect information from propaganda only by keeping away from the use of double standards and demanding that information is always as factual as possible.

THE SITUATION IN THE MEDITERRANEAN

The risk, however, is to focus too much on criticism without finally taking the opportunity to shed light on issues and solutions. For example, although the documentary was wrong in depicting the global situation, it portrayed the gravity of the situation in the Mediterranean quite accurately. According to a report published in 2017 by the European Commission, 85% of fish stocks are fished in unsustainable conditions in the Mediterranean, and 64% are overfished to the point of risking collapse in the coming years.³

"The situation in the Mediterranean is tragic, but we're still overfishing," says Gianpaolo Coro, researcher at [Cnr-Isti](#). Coro is one of the members of the independent and international research team whose studies informed the European Commissions' report. The team has developed the most widely used mathematical model (CMSY) to estimate the health of fish stocks.⁴ According to the model, fishing is sustainable if it allows fish populations to remain constant, in equilibrium - in other words, fishing is sustainable only if the amount of fish caught still allows for a fish population to fully repopulate in a year. "When the population falls below a certain threshold, which is different depending on the fish stock, fish stops reproducing," Coro explains.

INDUSTRIAL VS SMALL-SCALE FISHING





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July 09, 2019



By

Jessica Tengvall

MY ARTICLES

SUSTAINABLE FISHERIES | THE MSC LABEL

Have you ever noticed the little blue logo on some fish products and wondered what the three letters 'MSC' mean?

Well, MSC stands for Marine Stewardship Council. They assess if a fishery is well managed and sustainable, and grant certifications based on set standards. Not only does the blue label make it a little easier for us (consumers) to distinguish between sustainable and unsustainable seafood, but the certification is also to help recognise fisheries for being sustainable.

WHAT ARE THE MSC SUSTAINABLE STANDARDS?



WE THINK YOU'LL
FIND THESE OF
INTEREST



6 TIPS TO REDUCE THE
WATER FOOTPRINT OF
YOUR FOOD



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WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT RIGHT

Fact:

BYCATCH IS A PROBLEM

Various species from undesired fish, dolphins, whales, and even birds are accidentally caught in the nets of commercial fishing vessels. This is a huge problem, as it threatens biodiversity. Additionally, there is no market for many bycatch fish species, and fishermen often throw them dead overboard.

WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT WRONG

Fact:

BYCATCH DISCARDS AMOUNT TO 10%, NOT 40%.

According to Seaspiracy, the discards amount to 40% of the total catch, while FAO* reports that on average, discards are estimated to be 10%. A fact not provided by the documentary is that trawling is responsible for almost 80% of all discards, despite accounting for half of fishing globally.

**FAO is one of the most reliable sources of information on the food sector - a source Seaspiracy also cites itself.*

WHAT'S BEING DONE

About Bycatch

There are **several solutions** that are being tested and implemented **to avoid bycatch**. These include changing the size and positions of the net holes and using light and acoustic reflector technologies to ward off non-targeted species. But perhaps more importantly, trawling is being banned from several fishing sites around the world.

If you eat fish, check out and their bycatch recipes. They're a group of passionate chefs who live by the **no-discards** motto: "*We moeten eten wat de visser vangt*" (We have to eat what the fisherman catches).



WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT RIGHT

Fact:

FISHING NETS POLLUTE OUR OCEAN

A huge amount of plastics in our oceans is made up of fishing nets abandoned, lost or discarded by fishing vessels. Commercial vessels use several kinds of fishing nets that are often made with synthetic compounds, including microplastic materials and toxic chemicals, and put our ocean animals at risk.



WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT WRONG

Fact:

FISHING NETS ARE NOT 46% OF PLASTIC POLLUTION

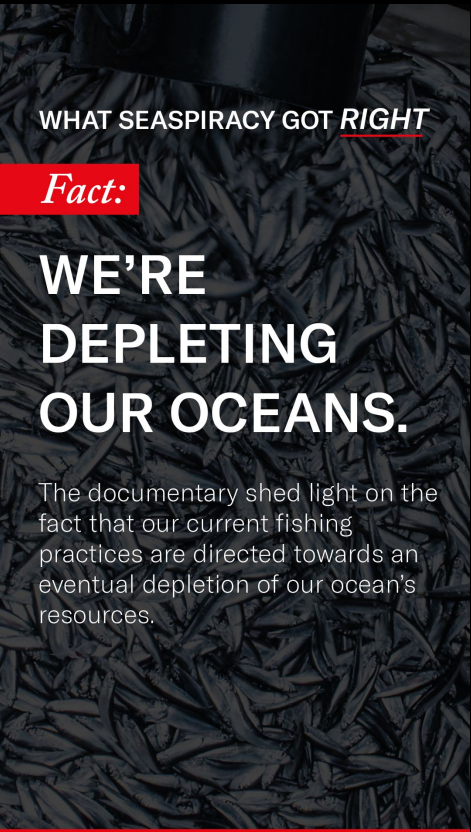
Seaspiracy claimed that 46% of the plastic in our ocean is made up of fishing nets. But this data comes from a study surveying the “Great Pacific Garbage Patch”. Data about this one specific region (*infamously known to be the plastic island in the Pacific*) was used to draw conclusions about what’s happening in the rest of our vast ocean.



WHAT’S BEING DONE

About Fishing Nets

No fishing gear has zero impact on the environment, but scientists and fishermen have been working hard together to create **innovative fishing gear** such as biodegradable fishing nets to try and **overcome these impacts**.



WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT RIGHT

Fact:

WE'RE DEPLETING OUR OCEANS.

The documentary shed light on the fact that our current fishing practices are directed towards an eventual depletion of our ocean's resources.

WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT WRONG

Fact:

WE AREN'T GOING TO EMPTY OUR SEAS BY 2048.

Seaspiracy cited an outdated paper about the global collapse of fisheries by 2048. The data was revisited by the very same researcher (Boris Worm). He and others have since concluded that this outcome is not likely, nor is it in the consensus based on current understandings of global fisheries. Swipe up to see his revisited conclusion.

Fact:

IN SOME FISHERIES, ABUNDANCE IS ACTUALLY GROWING.

A study published in 2020 (swipe up to read) showed that **fishery management** played a huge role in the increase or decrease of fish abundance. On average, for fish stocks with reasonably good catch data ~ roughly half of the world's fisheries ~ fish abundance is actually **healthy or improving**. For fisheries that are not **well regulated** or lacked in data, the abundance of fish is suspected to be **decreasing**.

WHAT'S BEING DONE

To Protect Wild Fish Stocks

Fisheries must not exceed the annual catch limits and their regional fishing quotas. There are also time and location restrictions to avoid over-pressuring vulnerable fish stocks - giving them time to recover. However, **enforcement and accountability** is another issue in the fishing industry. Some experts are advocating for the use of cameras and GPS tracking on fishing boats.



WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT RIGHT

Fact:

WE SHOULD EAT LESS FISH

According to Seaspiracy, we as consumers have a major role to play when it comes to solving the issues related to the fishing industry. They claim there is only *one* real solution to these issues: stop eating fish (and certain types of seafood). Indeed, there needs to be a significant reduction of fish consumption to reduce pressure on our oceans, but avoiding fish altogether is not the *only* solution to reverse the damage caused by the fishing industry.



WHAT SEASPIRACY GOT WRONG

Fact:

NOT ALL COMMERCIAL FISHING IS UNSUSTAINABLE

78.7% OF THE FISH WE CONSUME IS STILL FISHED WITHIN SUSTAINABILITY LIMITS.

Seaspiracy presents almost all commercial fishing as intensive and unsustainable. But, FAO reports that ~80% of the fish we *consume* is actually fished within sustainable limits. When fish is caught within these "sustainable limits," it can continue to reproduce in an infinite cycle without being exhausted because of the fishing. However, 60% of our fish cuts it very close to that sustainability limit – just on the edge of being sourced in an unsustainable way. So, the situation still requires our commitment to reduce our commercial fish consumption and relieve pressure from marine ecosystems.



WHAT YOU CAN DO:

Eat less fish - try other protein, mineral and vitamin sources. If you're already on a plant-based diet, make sure you meet all your body's **nutritional needs**.

Our Final Thoughts

Yes, our consumption habits need to change. Yes, our systems need to be better. But we can make the call to do so in a less polarising, less sensational way. Details matter, in media and in science.

What we felt was missing from the documentary was a message of hope. We don't need to resign ourselves to living in a world where nobody can be trusted but ourselves. We don't need to interpret an entire sector and all the people in it as if they were an evil force to eradicate. Yes, there's still a lot of work to do, but there are solutions to be implemented at all levels.

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So perhaps we can see Seaspiracy as a starting point – now it's up to us to learn more, identify possible solutions, and demand more transparency and concrete action from governments, companies, and ourselves.

We believe problems are opportunities to change our food system for the better. What about you? What do you believe?

The FoodUnfolded Team

Misconceptions About Fisheries: What Does The Science Say?

