



After the Fact | [Subsidizing the Decline in Ocean Health](#)

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TRANSCRIPT

[Sound of ocean waves crashing and seagulls]

Dan LeDuc, host: The ocean makes up more than 70 percent of the planet and much of life on Earth lives in these depths, out of sight to us. The waters are vast and can be mysterious, but one thing is certain: Global fish stocks are under pressure and smaller fishers are finding their way of life at risk. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations estimates that 93 percent of marine fisheries worldwide are fished at or beyond sustainable catch levels. That's our data point for this episode: 93 percent. And that's a big number.

Rashid Sumaila, professor at the Institute for the Ocean and Fisheries: You go to places like West Africa. People cannot even send their kids to school because the fish are no more there. And this has real deep repercussions for the communities not only in the short term, but also in the long term.

Dan LeDuc: That's Rashid Sumaila of the University of British Columbia's Institute for the Oceans and Fisheries. He examines the impact of fishing subsidies around the globe.

Rashid Sumaila: Our estimate is that we're losing about 10 million tons of fish a year, because we are not managing it well. This has huge food security implications in developing countries, in particular coastal communities, where they will, if not for fish, they wouldn't have any animal protein to eat.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc and this is "After the Fact." In this episode, we are looking at the food that a billion people around the planet depend on as their primary source of protein...fish. And as we've heard, fish are in trouble. The reasons for overfishing are not as obvious as you may think and, in a moment, we're going to talk about the subsidies many large, industrialized nations make to commercial fishing fleets. But, first, let's head to West Africa. There, we met Marianne Tening Ndiaye, a seafood processor in the coastal community of Joal, Senegal, and the head of the women's organization of seafood processors there, called Jam Bugum. Here's what she had to say.

[Market and ocean sounds]



Marianne Tening Ndiaye, seafood processor from Senegal: My family are farmers and fish processors. My father was a farmer, but my mother was a fish processor and her mother was also a fish processor. That was what they used to do for a living.

Fish is expensive in Senegal. We have nothing but fish. Processing fish is our only source of earning a living, especially here in this coastal area, in Joal.

With our income we pay for our children's education and support our families. It is our everything. A lot of people came back here thanks to the fishing trade. There are not many fish now.

There are a lot of fishermen but there are not many fish. There are a lot of fishermen, a lot of motorized boats, but the coastal erosion and climate change are among the main causes of fish scarcity.

The [industrial] boats are causing a lot of problems. We suffer from their actions. They are also one of the causes of fish scarcity. They take the small fish, which were supposed to grow and reproduce. Catching them is useless. They will make money by selling them, but this will have a negative impact in the future.

[Transition music]

Dan LeDuc: We spoke with Isabel Jarrett, who manages Pew's campaign to reduce harmful fisheries subsidies. She told us more about what they are and why it matters for the future of our oceans.

Dan LeDuc: Our globe is mostly ocean. So, the health of those oceans are really important to all of us. Talk to us a little bit about what's happening.

Isabel Jarrett, manager of reducing harmful fishing subsidies at Pew: Our oceans are facing unprecedented threats, like habitat destruction, for example, marine pollution. We've all heard a lot about plastics recently. Ocean acidification, the waters are warming with climate change. But one of the biggest threats that the oceans are facing right now is a problem with overfishing.

Dan LeDuc: We see big, vast swaths of water and lots of fish. We're actually taking too many fish out of the ocean right now. And what are the numbers?

Isabel Jarrett: The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that, in 2018, one-third of global fish stocks are overfished and another 60 percent of fish stocks are maxed out, which means no more fishing can take place sustainably.

Dan LeDuc: And so we're talking about nine-tenths of the fish stocks in the ocean. So, we know all about supply and demand and what makes a business work. But what's driving this overfishing?



Isabel Jarrett: One of the key drivers of overfishing are fishery subsidies. And fisheries subsidies are payments by governments to cover some of the costs of fishing.

Dan LeDuc: They're actually paying fishermen, the guys in the big boats.

Isabel Jarrett: Exactly. Normally when you have a business, in order to be profitable, first you have to cover the costs of the business before you begin to make a profit. But what's happening with fisheries subsidies is the costs, or many of the costs of fishing, are being covered by the government using taxpayers' money. So, to give you an example of how this works in practice, a study released in June 2018 showed that just 54 percent of high seas fisheries would be profitable without fisheries subsidies.

Dan LeDuc: And if it's not profitable, there will be less of it. Who is being hurt in this, beyond all of us? Because the oceans are being affected, and we all should care about that.

Isabel Jarrett: So, to give you a sense of how much governments around the world are paying in subsidies, we're talking about \$35 billion in subsidies. Now, not all subsidies are bad or harmful to the environment. There are some good subsidies, like subsidies that go to fisheries management, for example.

Good fisheries management is ensuring that you have monitoring and surveillance of your fisheries, ensuring that you conduct effective stock assessments, ensuring that you have management measures like catch limits, that you adhere to scientific advice. All of those things are important for good fisheries management. But about \$20 billion of government subsidies are considered harmful.

And of that \$20 billion, about 85 percent go to large-scale fishing vessels. So, really, that leaves just 15 percent of fisheries subsidies paid to small-scale fishing activities. So, what that means is, it distorts the market unfairly in favor of the large-scale vessels over the small-scale fishing vessels. And, really, those fishers that aren't subsidized lose out in the market.

Dan LeDuc: Where's a place where we can go on the ground and see what's happening?

Isabel Jarrett: One of the areas in the world that's particularly impacted is the coast of West Africa. And just to kind of hone in on one example is Senegal.

Senegal, of course, fishing is an incredibly important industry to that country. But it's estimated that the country loses in the region of 2 percent of its entire GDP to illegal fishing, primarily by foreign fleets.

Dan LeDuc: And, so, what do we know about what's happening in the coastal communities there?



Isabel Jarrett: One example is the story of Malik Sae. He's a fisher from Senegal, and he's been a fisher for all his life. He's come from a generation of fishers. But he doesn't want his children to become fishers, even though he takes great pride in his job. Because he's struggling to get fish each day, sometimes struggling to get enough fish to feed his family. And he doesn't want them to take on that job, because he's worried that they simply won't make enough money to survive.

Dan LeDuc: So why are there these subsidies? How did they get to this point?

Isabel Jarrett: Well, I think that much of the subsidy policy design was originally intended to help fishers. But what's happened is these policies are not having their intended effect anymore. They're not really helping those fishers that they were designed to help. Large-scale fishing vessels are receiving 85 percent of all government subsidies, whereas small-scale fishers are receiving just 15 percent of those subsidies.

Dan LeDuc: So how does this get changed? And what can be done to make things different?

Isabel Jarrett: Well, I think one of the biggest things that countries and governments around the world can do is remove harmful fisheries subsidies. At the moment, countries around the world are currently negotiating new rules at the World Trade Organization to reduce or eliminate harmful fisheries subsidies. And these talks have been going on for 20 years now.

But I think what's remarkable this time is that countries have two clear mandates to act. One is the universally agreed to United Nations Sustainable Development Goals. Specifically, there's a sustainable development goal that mandates countries to eliminate subsidies to IUU fishing and to activities that drive overfishing overcapacity. IUU is illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.

Dan LeDuc: And that's been a big driver of what we're seeing of fish stocks being overfished, right?

Isabel Jarrett: Right.

Dan LeDuc: One figure is 1 in 5 fish taken from the oceans is done that way.

Isabel Jarrett: And just to give you a sense, in some places, it's even worse than 1 in 5. So, in West Africa, it's estimated that as many as 2 in 5 fish that are fished are taken illegally.

Dan LeDuc: The Sustainable Development Goals are agreed upon by the member states at the United Nations, and one of those, as you mentioned, specifically talks about eliminating harmful fishing subsidies to have sustainable fishing across the globe. So, it's something that's recognized as a problem.



Isabel Jarrett: We're talking about a big-deal problem. And, moreover, the World Trade Organization itself has set its own mandate to fulfill that same U.N. SDG. In December of 2017, WTO members at their last ministerial conference agreed to, by the end of December 2019, agreed to new rules to eliminate subsidies to IUU fishing and prohibit subsidies that drive overcapacity and overfishing.

Dan LeDuc: Well, subsidies have been going on for some time. But we seem to know there's some urgency to it now. So, what's happening now that we know something really has to be addressed?

Isabel Jarrett: I think the reason that we need to do something now is we have more boats on the ocean than ever before. Much of that has been enabled by subsidies. We have boats that are able to go further for longer, that are incredibly technologically advanced. And that's the reason that we find ourselves in the situation that we are today.

Dan LeDuc: So, a number of countries are beginning to recognize that subsidies are harmful and have started to address that. What are a couple of those places? Is their experience a lesson for other places?

Isabel Jarrett: Yes, there are lessons for other countries to learn, in particular from countries like New Zealand and Norway, who've reformed their fishery subsidies policies. In 1989, cod stocks in Norway collapsed. And the government had to step in to make reform.

And, so, what we see is from a peak of 416 million dollars given in fisheries subsidies in 1981—by 2006, the Norwegian government was just giving 6 million dollars in fisheries subsidies.

Dan LeDuc: When we hear these numbers of 9 out of 10 fish stocks basically being overfished or sort of just right at maximum levels, it almost feels like, have we gone too far? Is it too late? But we also see some examples of comebacks.

Isabel Jarrett: The oceans are incredibly resilient. The example that I gave earlier of Norway just shows that fish stocks can rebound when given the chance to. But we've got to give the oceans and fish stocks the chance to rebound. And one of the ways that we can do that is removal of harmful fisheries subsidies.

Dan LeDuc: Back in Senegal, Marianne agrees we all have a role in protecting our oceans.

Marianne Tening Ndiaye: And the sea belongs to all of us. So, it's up to us to preserve it. Nobody else will preserve it for us. It is us, the beneficiaries, who should preserve it for our future generations because the sea is our only resource.

[Transition music]



Dan LeDuc: To learn more about our oceans and to see photos from Marianne’s community in Senegal, visit pewtrusts.org/afterthefact. And if you like what you’re hearing, tune in for new episodes of “After the Fact” on Apple Podcasts, Stitcher, Google Podcasts, Pandora, or wherever you listen. Thanks for joining us.

[Close (female voice): “After the Fact” is produced by The Pew Charitable Trusts.]