

## LISTEN TO VOA

Latest Newscast

MP3  

News Now Live

 

VOA Africa Live

 

## REGIONS

Africa  
Americas  
Asia  
Europe  
Middle East  
U.S.A.

## VOA IN-DEPTH

American Life  
Health & Science  
Entertainment  
News Analysis  
Special Reports

## PROGRAMS A TO Z

Shows by Name

XML 

VOA Mobile

 POD Podcasts

Webcasts

Correspondents

Broadcast Info

## LEARNING ENGLISH

Articles in  
*Special English*  
Pronunciations

## EDITORIALS

Read Editorials

## Asian Fishing Communities Suffer as Fish Stocks in Region Decline

By Claudia Blume  
Hong Kong  
18 June 2007

*Blume report (mp3) - download 1.2mb* 

*Listen to Blume report (mp3)* 

**More and more often, fishermen in Asia return home with nothing but a few small fish in their nets. Fish stocks in the region have declined dramatically in recent decades, and the quality of the catch has gone down. The future for poor fishing communities in the region looks bleak, as Claudia Blume reports from VOA's Asia News Center in Hong Kong.**

Hong Kong is best known as a financial and business center. But the territory with its many islands has about nine thousand fishermen who make a living casting their nets in the South China Sea. But often, the nets are almost empty when they return.

This fisherman says the sea used to be full of fish, but it is not any longer.

Andy Cornish is director of conservation at the Hong Kong office of the World-wild Fund for Nature. He says the catch rate of fishermen here has dropped significantly in the past five decades.

"In the 1950s, when they could spend one hour to catch one kilogram of fish, now they have to spend four hours to catch one kilogram of fish - so that gives you a very crude idea that the stocks declined about 25 percent of its levels since the 1950's," Cornish said.

The problem is not unique to Hong Kong. Stephen Hall, head of the WorldFish Center, a Malaysia research institute, says that all over Asia, sea fish stocks have gone down by up to 30 percent since the 1970's.



Hong Kong fishing boats



Man sorting newly arrived fish catch at the Hong Kong Wholesale Fish Market

Top 5

- Rice
- Mide
- Plans

More

- Aid (
- Hum
- in Ir
- Effor
- Free
- Soul
- Host
- Chie
- Supr
- Recc
- Seiz
- Fina
- Resc
- Tues
- US F
- Repr
- Tigh
- Sanc
- US L
- Step
- Pres
- Over

"The most dramatic decline for sea fisheries has been in the Gulf of Thailand and the east coast of Malaysia, but it's a pretty common story throughout the Asian region," Hall said.

Along with the drop in quantity, the quality of the seafood Asian fishermen are bringing back has also declined. The survival of some larger fish - such as some species of garoupa and shark - has come under threat, and fishermen now mostly bring home small fish that have a lower market value.



VOA photo - H. Bryson

Hall says the cause of the decline is over-fishing.

**Fishing nets on a boat in Hong Kong**

"There are too many fishers, the boats are too powerful. We have got highly effective fishing methods, and we basically over-harvested," Hall said.

Andy Cornish says there are two main reasons for the over-fishing. One is the rapid population growth in the region. Another, he says, is that many countries in the region have not taken fisheries management seriously enough.

Hong Kong is one of those.

"You don't even need a license to commercially fish within Hong Kong waters. So there is no control whatsoever on fish, the size of the catches, the size of nets - nothing like that," Cornish said. "So we have a situation where fishermen are competing against each other for the last fish that are left."



VOA photo - H. Bryson

The decline of fish stocks is a global problem, but it hits Asia harder than other parts of the world. The Asia-Pacific region is not

**Hong Kong fishermen hauling the catch**

only the world's largest producer of fish, but people here consume more fish and seafood than anywhere else. The WorldFish Center says fish and seafood traditionally provide up to 80 percent of the protein intake of people in the region.

While fish stocks are declining, the demand for seafood has risen as a result of the region's growing affluence. Prices have gone up, especially for large and rare species.

Live reef fish, for example, sell for as much as \$200 a kilogram in restaurants in Hong Kong, where the demand for rare delicacies is high.

Hall says seafood has become less affordable for Asia's poor.

"What we are seeing in particular is that the poorer people are eating less fish and the richer people are eating more fish," he said. "And that's more an issue in developing countries and Asian countries than it is in the rest of the world."

Experts say the large commercial fishing operators in Asia are still able to make money. But the declining fish stocks are devastating to millions of small fishermen, who are among the poorest people in Asia.

Simon Funge-Smith is a fisheries expert at the office of the United Nations' Food and Agricultural Organization in Bangkok. He says the FAO is concerned about the future of the region's fishing communities.

"The very serious concern that we have is that as the fishing livelihood becomes ever more marginal economically, the fishermen don't really have anywhere to turn - their only assets are their boats or their fishing gear, they quite often are landless or have very small land holdings or homes near the sea," Funge-Smith said. "They can't suddenly go off and do other jobs - they have no skills. So it's a very bleak future for their families."

Funge-Smith says the good news is that there is increasing willingness to take action. He says a lot of this action, however, is focused on high-seas fisheries and attempts to combat illegal fishing.

But Funge-Smith says not enough is being done at the national level. The biggest challenge, he says, is to reduce the overall amount of fish being taken.

"We simply can not keep taking fish out of these fisheries, they can only provide so much, and we probably hit the point where they can't provide anymore," he said. "So we need to acknowledge that and fish less hard, improve the diversity of the catch."

Funge-Smith says governments need to crack down on the use of destructive fishing gear that damages habitats and maritime nursing grounds. He also says marine sanctuaries need to be sealed off either permanently or seasonally, to enable fish to replenish their numbers.



[E-mail This Article](#)



[Print Version](#)