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## Fisheries reform not a great catch:

# Experts say quotas don't go far enough to prevent extinction

Ruth Schuster

Since time immemorial, humankind has loved fish. Some even think early modern humans exited Africa mainly along the coastlines less for the view and more because of the seafood.

But in prehistoric times they weren't doing it at industrial levels. After millennia of relying on seafood, we can no longer unthinkingly do so because of overexploitation – and the most overfished of all the seas is the Mediterranean, according to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

In 2019 the organization estimated that 62.5 percent of Mediterranean fish species are being fished unsustainably, meaning they're being extracted from the sea faster than they can reproduce themselves.

Well aware of this, in 2017 Israel amended its Fisheries Ordinance dating from 1937 and handed down new regulations. Israel also belongs to the General Fisheries Commission for the Mediterranean, a UN body that supervises the Black Sea and Mediterranean, and is spearheading sustainability of the fisheries and conservation, the Agriculture and Rural Development Ministry told Haaretz. However, it qualified that "Israel's ability to cooperate materially with the neighboring countries



Views of an underwater reef.

Oren Klein



A trawler at sea.

Alon Rothschild

in the Levant runs into obstacles because of the geopolitical situation."

Indeed, Israel is just one of the nations surrounding the Mediterranean. If the annual catch in the Mediterranean totals about 750,000 tons a year, Israel is responsible for some 2,500 tons.

That catch comprises

only 2.3 percent of the fish on Israeli tables. The rest is mostly from local and foreign freshwater and marine fish farms, while 0.4 percent comes from the Sea of Galilee (Lake Kinneret), says the Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel.

So one wonders why it matters whether Israelis fish in

the Mediterranean, don't fish, enact laws and obey the laws, or alternatively advise the fisheries inspectors to go jump in the lake.

"We shouldn't look at the whole Mediterranean Sea as one area," explains Prof. Menachem Goren of Tel Aviv University, because it's not homogenous. The Israeli waters host unique seafloor habitats, and also some species may exist elsewhere in the Mediterranean but not in our area (and vice versa).

"Some animals don't migrate. Like groupers – one can wipe them out locally," he says. "They may not disappear from the whole Mediterranean, but here they can go effectively extinct."



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# QUOTAS

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Ergo, the fisheries reform is of key importance to the Israeli ecosystem and fishing industry alike. Yet its interpretation is problematic, says Alon Rothschild, biodiversity policy manager at the SPNI and author of a report urging improvements to the reform.

## Saving the spawn

The new rules were a true revolution in Israel's fisheries management, Rothschild stresses: the problem is their interpretation by the fisheries commissioner at the Agriculture Ministry, who is subjected to pressure by the fishing lobby.

Among other things, the new regulation set the basis for ecosystem-based fisheries management, banning artisanal and recreational fishing for 60 to 90 days during the breeding season and forbidding bottom trawling in 40 percent of Israel's waters. The bottom-trawling fleet fell from about 30 to 16 boats by compensating their owners for decommissioning them, Rothschild says.

For depleted species to rebound, fishing must be categorically banned during spawning season, but fishermen can apply for exemptions. And the ministry enables flexibility even though the ecological system hasn't had a chance to react to the changes.

"In the four years since the regulations were approved, that flexibility clause has been widened to enable almost all fishing in spawning season. In practice, it's shortened to just 30 days," Rothschild says.

For 2020, the Agriculture Ministry banned fishing for 72 days, but only 44 of those days were a total ban as the law intended, he says. Then the fisheries commissioner "caved" before the fishing lobby and slashed the ban to just 32 days, Rothschild adds, noting that the courts declined to intervene.

Ideally, the spawning season fishing ban should last 120 days, and no less than 90 days, in order to protect commercial fish populations and protected species such as turtles and rays, the SPNI says.

## Scarring the seabed

On land, we see when a species goes extinct. In the sea, we can't be sure. Spotting an adult fish once or twice a year means the species has become locally nonfunctional. The solution starts with noticing the problem.

Part of the problem, Rothschild says, is a lack of monitoring. Take the state of the grouper, a favorite on Israeli tables. Israelis may not realize they're eating mainly imported fish.

Asked how the local state of the grouper has changed over the last 20 years, Rothschild says there's been no direct monitoring, "but the Israel Nature and Parks Authority surveys indicate that adult groupers are very rare outside marine reserves. Indirect information we have, for instance, is that the catch per unit of effort is declining. Per hour of fishing, fishermen get less fish. They have to invest more effort to get the same amount of fish, ergo the amount of fish is diminishing."

Other indirect data shows that catches now contain a significant portion of young fish, he says. "Once you take

up a lot of juveniles, the population has difficulty recovering," he adds.

Could pollution be a cause? "Pollution in the Israeli Mediterranean has improved dramatically in the last 30 years," Rothschild responds, applauding the Environmental Protection Ministry's monitoring. "The number one factor hurting our marine life is fishing."

So restaurants have a solution but the ecosystem doesn't. Groupers are a top predator, and when they disappeared invasive species that reached the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, such as the rabbit fish, were among the fish to make merry and multiply out of control.

We can eat rabbit fish too, but meanwhile they're grazing to the point of stressing the Mediterranean plant life. When algae diminish we wind up with a marine desert, Rothschild says.

"Full fish and habitat rehabilitation may take 10 to 20 years, and in this period we must reduce the fishing pressure dramatically if we want to succeed," he says. "It is in the fishermen's interest no less than that of the environmentalists. The regulators must be bold and stand up to the pressure, while helping the fishermen financially."

How bold? The reform neglected certain crucial points, the SPNI claims. Take bottom-trawling: fishing by dragging a net over the seabed. The practice is unspecific, disrupts the sediment, throws up rocks and scars the seafloor. "Among the anthropogenic activities impacting the deep seafloor, commercial fish trawling is considered to be the most harmful due to its widespread geographical presence, recurrence and

intensity," a team wrote in *Nature* in 2017.

The 2017 reform banned bottom-trawling in a third of Israel's waters – north of Moshav Dor (near Haifa) to the border with Lebanon – in keeping with updated analysis of the habitats vulnerable to the practice, the Agriculture Ministry says.

Ecologically, bottom-trawling should be abolished, period, the SPNI and others urge. In late 2019, an interministerial committee headed by the planning administration concurred.

The bottom-trawling regulations are "more a Band Aid than a cure," Goren says. "The reform did the minimum of the minimum, but if fishermen keep casting about left and right, it hasn't achieved the effect we want."

## Salvation or 'Isra-bluff'?

Three years after handing down policy limiting fishing during spawning season, the Agriculture Ministry says the presence of vulnerable species, including sea turtles, has improved. "The situation of the fish in our area is much better than in Turkey," the ministry adds for the sake of comparison. "The aim is to strike a balance between optimal preservation of the fisheries and protecting the livelihood of the fishermen," it says, adding that it supervises the state of the fisheries year-round, also in order to test the efficacy of the restrictions. If the ministry concludes that the restrictions need to be toughened, they will be, it says.

To gain exemptions from the spawning season ban, the fishing lobby has been pushing "catch and release": When fishing in the

spawning season or in marine reserves, if they catch a protected or juvenile fish, they'll return it to the ocean.

How exactly does one not catch a specific fish? "That's exactly the snag," Rothschild says. "They lower their nets and if they catch a grouper, they're supposed to throw it back into the water." Maybe they do, but if a fish is trapped in a net for hours or is caught on a fishing hook and injured, it will either die, have feeding difficulties or have a lower chance of reproducing.

"The regulations are excellent, but the fisheries' interpretation of the spawning season is 'Isra-bluff,'" he says (referring to when you say when one thing but do another). "We expect the Agriculture Ministry to base its decisions on science, and to have a real spawning season ban, not a virtual one."

The ministry claims indiscriminate catching can be significantly reduced by using different types of nets, denser or different types of bait, for instance.

Adi Barash, chairwoman of the Sharks in Israel NGO and doctoral candidate at the University of Haifa, told Haaretz recently that coastal shark and ray populations in the Mediterranean are down about 95 percent, and that over half of them are in danger of extinction.

The ministry stated that cartilaginous fishing has been banned, and that "analysis of the information in our possession shows a picture of stability regarding these species, and even of rebound."

Rothschild, however, charges that the political decisions on fishing aren't based on data.

"There's no orderly monitoring of the fishing; no annual reports on fishing re-

sults; no advisory committee that creates the scientific report and helps fisheries plan," he says. What's needed is data, every year, on the state of the different species – and an advisory body with scientists and professionals to make "science-based decisions," he adds.

Preserving Israel's fisheries and habitats is a higher value, and the ministry says it has been promoting sweeping changes in the way fishing is managed and adapted as necessary. It adds that the fishing regulations are under further review for amendment to be in compliance with UN policy for the Mediterranean Sea, and in order to better supervise Israeli fishing boats – including bottom trawlers – in the deep seas. The ministry adds that its fisheries department carries out annual monitoring, helped by a data collection company.

Rothschild says the ministry hasn't published a monitoring report since 2010 and its internal reports are based mainly on fishermen's reports, not real field research.

"The right thing to do, and what we expect the new minister from the Kahol Lavan party [Alon Schuster] to do, is to maintain the existing fishing regulations, fulfill them fully in practice, while allocating the funds needed for the bottom-trawling buyout scheme, and compensation for the artisanal fishing spawning season ban" – maintaining the real regulation on the fishing effort, while financially supporting the fishermen.

"Fish can't make phone calls," Rothschild points out, "so it's the Agriculture Ministry's job to make sure this resource is preserved, despite fishermen's pressures on the regulators."