Israel's SEASPIRACY

"The Blue Half": SPNI's Mission to Protect the Marine Environment and Ecosystem

The Society for the Protection of Nature in Israel
Educate. Love. Protect.

החברה להגנת הטבע
הרפורמה להצלת הים התיכון

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"The Blue Half": SPNI's Mission to Protect the Marine Environment and Ecosystem

The new Netflix documentary Seaspiracy has made waves around the world, including Israel, painting a devastating picture of the nature of the global fishing industry.

Since 2012, we at SPNI have understood, based on science and research, that fishing is the number one threat to our oceans. This is not to ignore other issues such as pollution, the fossil fuel industry, climate change, and invasive species.

Over the last decade we have been fighting to implement the first reform of Israel's fishing industry since the 1950's. SPNI has been fighting to create marine reserves where all fishing is banned, a breeding season moratorium, a limit to the size of fishing fleets and fishing quotas. We've also campaigned to minimize the damage caused by the natural gas industry, aquaculture, and beachside developments including new marinas.

Fishing has severe ecological consequences, both for "non-target" species that are defined as bycatch and for the functioning of the entire ecosystem. The marine ecosystem plays a crucial role in maintaining the health of our planet, including through carbon sequestration, maintaining water quality, and as a source of inspiration and pleasure. SPNI does not wish to see fishing totally banned but recognizes that it must be closely regulated with tough and effective enforcement.

In terms of fish consumption, we advocate for reducing consumption of wildlife in general, and of fish in particular, as set out below.

Below, we have collated some of the issues that were raised in Seaspiracy and mapped out how things stand with these issues in Israel, as well as what we are doing about them, and how we can have a positive impact on our oceans.
For more information, visit www.mafish.org.il

Marine nature conservation

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

- Only 3% of Israel'sMediterranean Sea is recognized as no-take marine reserves.
- A further 6% are currently being planned.
- There are no marine reserves in Israel's exclusive economic zone.

Conservation

We are calling for at least 20% of Israel's territorial waters to be designated as marine reserves. We are involved in promoting several plans for marine reserves and marine national parks, including the objections we filed regarding the Achziv-Rosh HaNikra Marine Reserve and the HaCarmel and Avtach Marine Reserves, which enabled these to be defined as no-take zones.

As a result of our work the 2020 Policy Document for Israel's Maritime Space declared that all marine nature reserves in Israel would be No-Take Zones, where no fishing is permitted[1].

We are advancing the first marine reserve in Israel's exclusive economic zone—in the deep-sea area of Palmachim disturbance, a unique site with deep-sea coral gardens and methane seeps, and which is a spawning area for Atlantic Bluefin Tuna.
The proposal is being put to the Minister for Environmental Protection, and in parallel we have submitted a proposal to designate this site as a Fisheries Restricted Area (FRA) to the General Fisheries Commission of the Mediterranean (GFCM).

photo by: Uri Magnos

(1) Planning Administration. 2020. Maritime Policy for Israel's Mediterranean Waters - May 2020.

Destructive fishing methods

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

As a result of SPNI's activities, trawl fishing has been banned under the 2016 fishing regulations in around 40% of the Israeli Mediterranean territorial waters, including the entire area north of Dor beach (north of Zichron Yaakov), and in shallow waters and rocky areas. In addition, eight commercial trawlers have been removed from service, using 20 million NIS raised from government budgets.

Scuba fishing has finally been banned as part of the 2016 fishing regulations, in the wake of SPNI's activities.

Conservation

We are working to promote an outline plan to completely scrap Israel's trawling fleet by providing compensation to fishermen, and to designate all Israel's territorial waters as areas where trawl fishing is prohibited. A related recommendation has been adopted as a result of our work, as part of the 2020 Policy Document for Israel's Marine Space, and we are working for its implementation.

Harm to flag species and damage from fishing fleets

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

It is estimated that in Israel's Mediterranean coastal region, some 3,000 sea turtles, three dolphins, and thousands of sharks and rays are killed every year as fishing bycatch[2,3,4]. The damage to "ordinary" non-commercial fish species amounts to millions of fish that are caught as bycatch and die unnecessarily.

Conservation

Following the work of SPNI, including two petitions to the High Court of Justice, promotion of a Private Bill, professional scientific work, and a public campaign, a reform of the fishing regulations was approved in 2016 which, for the first time, imposed spatial, temporal, and quota restrictions on fishermen:

- Fishing moratoria in the spring and summer months, which is the spawning season for many fish species in the Mediterranean Sea off the Israeli coast, for a period of 60-90 days. We worked with the Ministry of Agriculture to ensure that the fishing moratorium was total. We opposed (in the form of three petitions filed to date) fishing permits granted by the Fisheries Officer.
- Double the mesh size of gill nets to reduce incidental catch of juvenile fish.
- Set a daily catch quota for sport fishing.

(2) Barash, A., I. Van Rijn, H. Lubinevski, M. Goren, and D. Tchernov. 2017. Long-term bottom trawl fishery surveys of Elasmobranchs off the Israeli Mediterranean coast. The 21st European Elasmobranch Association Annual Scientific Conference, 49.

(3) Elsar, M. 2018. The unintentional capture of dolphins with fishing gear in Israel.

(4) Levy, Y., S. Bat-Sheva Rothman, Y. Adam, R. Sade, U. Kandanyan, M. Goren, D. Edelist, A. Weinberger, D. Tchernov, N. Stern, N. Perry, V. Berkun, R. Gil, and O. Frid. 2015. A small fishery with a high impact on sea turtle populations in the eastern Mediterranean. Zoology in the Middle East 61(4): 300-317.

Enforcement of fishing regulations

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

After years of minimal supervision and enforcement of fishing laws, in 2018 a Marine Enforcement Unit was established in the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. SPNI played a key role in advancing the regulations enforced by this unit, in pooling resources for its establishment, and in putting pressure on the Ministry of Agriculture to transfer its enforcement powers to the unit.

At this time, there is still no legal requirement in Israel to install satellite tracking devices on fishing vessels, which Israel has been obliged to do since 2009.

Conservation

Since 2015, SPNI has operated the Sea Watch app, which enables citizens to make in time reports on marine hazards, primarily fishing offenses. The app relays the data in real time to enforcement authorities, and actions are monitored in cooperation with law enforcement. As a result, hundreds of reports have been received to date, regarding suspicions of fishing offenses being committed, and have led to dozens of cases where infractions were addressed.

SPNI is working with government officials to promote the installation of VMS (satellite tracking technology) on fishing vessels. We have filed a complaint against the Ministry of Agriculture on this matter to the General Fisheries Commission of the Mediterranean, and we promoted a private bill that was blocked by the Ministry of Agriculture.

photo by: Alon Rotchild

Fishing subsidies

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

Since 2005, trawlers in Israel have been receiving excise duty refunds on diesel, at the maximum rate of 69%. In this way, cheap fuel from subsidies is enabling this destructive method of fishing. These subsidies are estimated to be worth around five million NIS per year for the trawler fleet.

Conservation

From 2014–2018, SPNI sent a detailed request to the Israel Tax Authority that asked for fuel subsidies for trawling to be canceled. Unfortunately we were unsuccessful.

Fishing tackle debris and "ghost nets"

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

Monitoring of waste along the Israeli coast has revealed that fishing equipment (rods, lines, nets, hooks, floats) often constitutes more than a third of the debris found in shallow waters[5]. Out of the water, it is estimated that around 3% of waste is abandoned fishing gear[6]. Abandoned fishing gear found in the water is usually the result of equipment that has become stuck on the sea floor, and thus remains in the water rather than being washed up on the shore, where it poses an ongoing danger to marine wildlife. In Israel, no estimate has yet been made of the levels of abandoned fishing gear, but it is understood from studies undertaken in the region that at least 1% of fishing gear is abandoned at sea[7].

Conservation

Thanks to citizen reporting through SPNI's Sea Watch app, and in partnership with the Israel Nature and Parks Authority's Marine Unit, 27 ghost nets have been removed from the sea in the last five years.

photo by: Hagay Nativ

Declaring species to be protected and prohibiting their fishing

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

In Israel, sharks and rays have declared as protected natural assets since 2005; however, strict enforcement against their hunting only began in 2015, following a campaign by SPNI. Endangered sensitive species, such as the Groupers and Atlantic Bluefin Tuna, are currently allowed to be fished in Israel. The Atlantic Bluefin Tuna migrates to our shores for spawning in the spring, and it is estimated that at least 20 tons are caught during that season.

Conservation

In 2017, SPNI filed a petition demanding that five Grouper species and the Atlantic Bluefin Tuna be declared as protected species. Despite the initial intention of the Minister of Environmental Protection to protect these species, the Minister withdrew, and as a result we filed an additional petition in 2020, demanding that the Dusky Grouper be designated as a protected species.

Currently, the Minister of Environmental Protection is examining the possibility of designating the Golden Grouper as a protected species, and of providing the Dusky Grouper with partial protection, which in our view is insufficient.

(5) Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2020. Marine Waste Monitoring Report, 2017-2018, as part of national monitoring program.

(6) Pasternak et al. 2017. Sources, composition and spatial distribution of marine debris along the Mediterranean coast of Israel. Marine Pollution Bulletin 114:2, 1036-1045.

(7) Yeruham et al, 2020. Fishing action and management plan to reinforce fish and nature in the Mediterranean. SPNI

Modern Slavery in the Fishing Industry

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

In 2014, the Hotline for Refugees and Migrants published a report documenting cases of modern slavery among migrants on a number of trawling vessels operating out of Ashdod.

Conservation

SPNI is working to scrap Israel's entire trawler fleet in which migrants find work.

Climate Change

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

A recent article estimated that worldwide, trawlers are responsible for the release of one gigaton of carbon annually, a number equivalent to that of the global aviation industry. In Israel, 19 trawlers are still operating.

Conservation

SPNI is working to shut down Israel's trawler fleet completely. In addition, we are working to promote the extensive protection of marine areas as no-take marine reserves, in order to ensure their resilience and resistance to climate change, and to enable carbon fixation.

Fish consumption

Current Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)

Currently, 2% of Israeli fish consumption comes from fish stocks in the Israeli Mediterranean. The remainder (mainly) comes from on-land aquaculture.

Conservation

We recommend minimizing consumption of wildlife in general, and fish in particular, as much as possible. Please bear in mind that imported fish that have been caught in the wild abroad, as well as fish and seafood farmed in aquaculture, all have a negative ecological footprint.
If you do choose to consume fish, click here for tips on how to do so responsibly.

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