

UN urges management of inland fisheries for food, income stability



Fishing in rivers and lakes provides around 60 million jobs worldwide

22 October 2010 – The need to conserve and properly manage inland fisheries is often neglected despite the crucial role they play in balancing aquatic ecosystems and as sources of food and livelihoods to millions of people across the world, a new report released today by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) says.

According to the new publication, rapid environmental changes constitute a challenge to the viability of future fish stocks despite more than 40 years of steady production globally.

Changes in seasonal flooding patterns and loss of habitat, unsustainable farming practices and excessive use of water from lakes and rivers are some of the threats to inland fish, according to the report, prepared jointly by UNEP and the World Fish Centre and entitled **Blue Harvest: Inland Fisheries as an Ecosystem Service**. Urbanization, road-building, pollution, including wastewater discharge into inland fisheries and climate change are some of the other threats to the fresh water fish,

Urbanization, road-building, pollution, including wastewater discharge into inland fisheries and climate change are some of the other threats to the fresh water fish, says the report, which was launched at the 10th conference of the parties to the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) under way in the Japanese city of Nagoya.

It stresses that aside from the nutritional benefits, fish also play a key role in the functioning of aquatic ecosystems and cites the consumption of plankton, plants, insects, and other fish as critical to the stability and resilience of river and lake habitats.

Nutrients and organic matter from fish eggs, carcasses and excretion support the production of algae, insect larvae and other fish species in rivers and lakes, helping to link ecosystems.

Declining fish populations can have a serious knock-on effect for other organisms, the report says, giving the example of the widespread deaths of the cisco fish in Lake Mendota in the United States which led to changes in the plankton composition of the lake, decreased the level of nutrients in the water column and caused a decline in the biomass of algae.

"This fascinating report has brought to the fore the often neglected subject of inland fisheries. While marine fisheries are under increasing scrutiny, those based on river and lake systems rarely engage the international community – an oversight of potentially profound implications," **said** Achim Steiner, UNEP's Executive Director.

“Why? Because an estimated 100 million people in Africa alone get important levels of daily protein from these inland sources alongside essential vitamins and minerals. Meanwhile, unofficial estimates put the global inland catch at close to 30 million tonnes, comparable to official marine catches, and employment at 60 million people – 13 million more than in equivalent marine fisheries,” he added.

The report urges States to adopt an ‘ecosystem approach’ to managing inland fisheries because of the multiple threats to their health and productivity.

Such an approach needs to take into account a wide range of factors, including reducing pollution and destructive fishing practices, maintaining river flows and restoring damaged habitats and protecting wetlands and other feeding and fish spawning grounds.

It recommends that new dams be located where they have the least impact on river ecosystems and that fish-friendly designs that are managed to allow fish migration and delivery of seasonal flows. Older dams need to be altered to provide similar benefits, the report adds.

“Recent achievements in the United States and the Vu Gia-Thu Ban River basin in Viet Nam show that political will and careful planning can provide win-win solutions,” said Patrick Dugan, the lead author of the report, who is based at the World Fish Center in Penang, Malaysia.

“These have kept some river corridors free from dams, while others are managed for both environmental and hydropower objectives. We need urgently to replicate these successes more widely and in larger rivers if we are to sustain the world’s inland fisheries.”

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