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***Seaspiracy* in Israel**

**“The Blue Half”: SPNI’s Marine Project to Protect Nature and the Sea**

The new Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy* has made waves around the world, including in Israel—and paints a gloomy picture of the global fishing industry and fish consumption.

Since 2012, we at SPNI’s The Blue Half project have been working from the understanding, based on science and data, that fishing is the number one threat to our oceans—of course alongside other hazards like pollution, the fossil fuel industry, climate change, and biological invasions.

We promote fishing-free marine nature reserves and the effective management of Israel’s fishing industry through restrictions that determine where, when, and how fishing can take place, and which entail a significant reduction in fishing activity, including in terms of the size of fishing fleets and the volume of fishing that can occur at a specific time and place. In parallel, we also work to minimize the damage caused by the natural gas industry, aquaculture, and other infrastructures—including by beachside developments such as new marinas.

Fishing is hunting at sea. It has severe ecological consequences, both for the “non-target” species that are captured as “bycatch” and for the functioning of the ecosystem as a whole. Marine fish play an important role in protecting the health of our planet, including through carbon fixation, maintaining water quality, and as a source of inspiration and pleasure for educational, leisure, and tourism activities. We do not reject fishing entirely, neither for human livelihoods and subsistence, nor as a recreational activity. However, these activities need to be closely managed, and, to justify their legitimacy, must be subject to strict regulations and tough, effective enforcement, as detailed below.

In terms of fish consumption, we advocate 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 an impact on, and help, our oceans.**

**For more information, visit** [**www.mafish.org.il**](http://www.mafish.org.il)

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| **Issue raised in *Seaspiracy*** | **Situation in Israel (Mediterranean Sea)** | **Action taken by The Blue Half** |
| Marine nature conservation | * Only 3% of the Israeli Mediterranean Sea is earmarked as fishing-free nature reserves. * A further 6% is in various planning processes. * There are no marine reserves in Israel’s exclusive economic zone. | We are calling for at least 20% of Israel’s territorial waters to be designated as marine nature reserves. We are involved in promoting individual plans for nature 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-fishing reserves.  Following our activities, 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]](#footnote-1).  We are advancing the first nature reserve in Israel’s exclusive economic zone—in the deep-sea area of the Palmachim disturbance, a nature site with deep corals and methane springs, 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 for a no-fishing zone in this area to the General Fisheries Commission of the Mediterranean. |
| Destructive fishing methods | As a result of The Blue Half’s activities, trawl fishing has been banned under the 2016 fishing regulations in around 40% of the Israeli Mediterranean, including the whole of the area north of Dor, and in shallow waters and rocky areas. In addition, 8 commercial trawlers have been scrapped from the fleet using 20 million NIS raised from government budgets.  Scuba fishing using air tanks has finally been banned as part of the 2016 fishing regulations, in the wake of The Blue Half’s activities. | 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 marine waters as areas where trawl fishing is prohibited. A recommendation in this spirit 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 fish species and fishing fleet damage | It is estimated that in Israel’s Mediterranean coastal region, some 3,000 sea turtles, 3 dolphins, and thousands of sharks and rays are harmed every year as fishing bycatch.[[2]](#footnote-2)[[3]](#footnote-3)[[4]](#footnote-4) The damage to “ordinary” non-commercial fish species amounts to millions of fish that are caught as bycatch and thrown to their unnecessary deaths. | Following the work of The Blue Half, 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 location, time, 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; and we opposed (in the form of three petitions filed to date), fishing permits granted by the Fisheries Officer. * Double the mesh size of standing nets to reduce harm to juvenile fish. * Set a daily catch quota for sport fishing. |
| Enforcement of fishing activity | After years of a lack of governance and enforcement of fishing laws, in 2018 a Marine Enforcement Unit was established in the Israel Nature and Parks Authority. The Blue Half was a key player 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 requirement in Israel to install satellite tracking devices on fishing vessels, which Israel has been obliged to do since 2009 | Since 2015, The Blue Half has operated the Sea Watch app, a center that enables citizens to report 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, that have led to tens of enforcement actions.  The Blue Half 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 (MK Mickey Levy) that was blocked by the Ministry of Agriculture. |
| Fishing subsidies | 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 fueling this destructive method of fishing. The scope of the support is estimated to be around 5 million NIS per year for the trawler fleet. | In 2014-2018, The Blue Half sent a detailed request to the Israel Tax Authority that asked for fuel subsidies for trawling to be canceled. Unfortunately, our request was not granted. |
| Fishing tackle debris and “ghost nets” | 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]](#footnote-5) Out of the water, it is estimated that around 3% of waste is abandoned fishing tackle.[[6]](#footnote-6) Abandoned fishing tackle 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 tackle, but it is understood from studies undertaken in the region that at least 1% of tackle is abandoned at sea.[[7]](#footnote-7) | Thanks to citizen reporting through The Blue Half’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 5 years. |
| Declaring species to be protected and prohibiting their fishing | In Israel, sharks and rays have been protected species since 2005; however, dedicated enforcement against their hunting only began in 2015, following a campaign by SPNI.  Endangered sensitive species, such as the Grouper 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. | In 2017, The Blue Half filed a petition demanding that 5 Grouper species and the Atlantic Bluefin Tuna be declared 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. |
| Modern slavery in the fishing industry | 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. | The Blue Half is working to scrap Israel’s entire trawler fleet. |
| Climate change | A recent article estimated that worldwide, trawlers are responsible for the release of 1 gigaton of carbon annually, a number equivalent to that of the global aviation industry. In Israel, 19 trawlers are still operating. | The Blue Half is working to shut down Israel’s trawler fleet entirely.  In addition, we are working to promote the extensive protection of marine areas as fishing-free nature reserves, in order to ensure their resilience and immunity to climate change, and to enable carbon fixation. |
| Fish consumption | Currently, 2% of Israeli fish consumption comes from fish stocks in the Israeli Mediterranean. The remainder (mainly) comes from aquaculture on land. | **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: https://bit.ly/2GFBCCN |

1. Planning Administration, 2020. Maritime Policy for Israel’s Mediterranean Waters. May 2020 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
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. Page 49 *in* The 21st European Elasmobranch Association Annual Scientific Conference. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Elsar, M. 2018 The unintentional capture of dolphins in fishing gear in Israel [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
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 317–61:300. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ministry of Environmental Protection, 2020. Marine waste monitoring report, 2017-2018, as part of national monitoring [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
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 [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Yeruham et al, 2020. Fishing action and management plan to reinforce fish and nature in the Mediterranean. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)