

# The Silences in *Seaspiracy*

A recent documentary on fisheries and its impacts on the marine environment has grabbed widespread global attention for not only what it says but also for what it does not address

The recently released Netflix documentary *Seaspiracy* (2021) has sparked a frenzy of discussion in various media outlets and on social media platforms, focusing not just on fisheries but on its impacts on the marine environment. The film provides a broad overview of the many ways that humans are using – and abusing – the oceans, from plastic pollution, to corruption in fisheries management, to the controversial whaling industry. While the film has been effective in introducing a broad public to the many social and environmental issues stemming from the exploitation of the oceans and large-scale industrial fishing, there is much more to fisheries that it completely neglects. Both positive and negative reviews of the film have flooded the Internet, with fans praising the film for shedding light on exploitative practices in the fishing industry, while critics have focused on debunking the myths the film propagates.

Many reviews have focused on refuting specific scientific facts that the film got wrong regarding global fish stock levels, bycatch and sustainability measurements. This review, however, focuses on three overarching issues on which the film is silent, namely, the contribution of fish to food and nutrition security; the diversity of fisheries and aquaculture; and the importance of fishers' knowledge.

Made by first-time British director Ali Tabrizi, the film tells the story of his own life-long interest in the ocean, stemming from a childhood fascination with whales, dolphins and nature documentaries. As an adult, he dabbles in plastic pollution activism by collecting trash on beaches and calling local restaurants to advocate against single-use plastics. He notes that his romantic vision of the ocean completely changed

once he started digging into a side of the story he had not known before: just how big the human impact on the seas had become.

The film begins by highlighting the many evils of plastic pollution, including beached whales in the United Kingdom with stomachs full of trash, before quickly moving on to the Japanese whaling industry, and shark fisheries catering to the Chinese fin market. The focus then broadens to global fisheries, presenting a dizzying number of statistics on the

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decline in marine species populations, the contribution of fishing nets to plastic pollution, and slavery and human-rights abuses on industrial boats.

Ali highlights several important issues including overfishing and the depletion of fish stocks; illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; and the ecological impacts of destructive methods, such as trawling, on the seabed. It raises the question: how can you ensure fishing is sustainable around the world while there are so many industrial boats in the water? The film has also been praised for shedding light on brutal cases of slavery in fisheries, although many civil society and international organizations have been advocating against this practice for years. Consider, for example, the International Labour Organization's work on forced labour and human trafficking, the Ghost Fleet documentary, and the Environmental Justice Foundation's Seafood Slavery campaign.

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The film challenges powerful actors in the fisheries sector, governments and other decisionmakers, who appear to be willfully turning a blind eye to the destructive nature of large-scale industrial fisheries, urging them to step up and own responsibility for managing fisheries in a way that is more sustainable, accountable and transparent. While the film gets some things right, it misses out on some critical matters.

### Irreplaceable food and nutrition

It concludes with a call for people to “stop eating fish” as a way to protect the world’s oceans and the diverse species within them. Switching to a plant-based diet is presented as a win-win solution, allowing consumers to feel better about their health and their environmental footprint, while ignoring how plant-based alternatives contribute to further intensifying agricultural production and pressure on land use. The filmmakers—Europeans all—demonstrate a clear interest in promoting veganism and questioning sustainability in the food system. Its producer Kip Anderson also produced *Cowspiracy: The Sustainability Secret* (2014).

Telling consumers to simply stop eating fish is a surprisingly lazy, nearsighted conclusion, especially considering the film is aiming to challenge decisionmakers to make

structural changes in the fishing industry. Not only does this conclusion fail to address structural imbalances or mitigate sectoral problems, but it also shifts the responsibility to “do better” away from governments and fishing companies and on to the consumers. While being a responsible consumer and making informed decisions about the type of seafood one buys is certainly important, the role of consumers is only one piece of the puzzle.

Governments, on the other hand, have the power to shape legislation and enforce rules to ensure fishing is carried out responsibly. It is also much too simplistic to suggest that anyone can easily stop eating fish. What about the billions of people around the world who do not have the luxury to make this choice and eat fish because it is the only source of protein they can access or afford? Fish is, after all, a critical contributor to global food and nutrition security, particularly in African and Asian countries. Fisheries provide employment and livelihood to more than 800 mn people around the world. Giving up fish consumption has a big impact on their ability to maintain a stable living.

### Diverse worlds of fisheries and aquaculture

The film glosses over the diversity that exists within fisheries and aquaculture

in terms of scale, approaches, methods and gears used. It presents a broad-brush perspective of how fish is caught and produced, assuming that the only philosophy behind these activities is to make a profit at any cost—human or environmental. This is neither a fair nor accurate reflection of the sector's diversity across the world. Certainly, fisheries is a business and employs millions of people; it is also a vast industry that looks very different from country to country, as also within countries. For example, there is a big difference between the economic and environmental impacts of a 100-m industrial boat with a crew of 50 fishing for three months in the North Atlantic, and a 5-m canoe with a crew of four fishing for eight hours off the coast of southern India.

In small-scale fisheries alone, from Ecuador to Canada and South Africa to Thailand, there is a vast range of fishing methods and gears used; or boat sizes; or species caught. Yet, the only attention given to small-scale fisheries in the film is one brief example of the impacts of illegal fishing on coastal communities and food security in West Africa. Many small-scale fishers around the world would argue that they do, in fact, engage in sustainable practices that protect the environment and contribute to healthy aquatic ecosystems. These approaches are centred around upholding human rights in fisheries and coastal communities, and the guiding principles of the Voluntary Guidelines for Securing Sustainable Small-Scale Fisheries in the Context of Food Security and Poverty Eradication (SSF Guidelines).

### **Fishers: reserves of knowledge**

Besides one brief interview with a whaler from the Faroe Islands, the voices of fishers are non-existent in the film. Interviews are conducted with fisheries scientists, biologists, environmentalists, academics, physicians, government officials, and representatives from environmental and conservation organizations. Not fishers. Being immersed in fishing daily, their knowledge and understanding of the sector contributes valuable insights into its complexities. Yet, the film leaves out these voices, including a wide range of perspectives on how fishing can be done responsibly, respecting the environment.

Some fishers would highlight how knowledge of the breeding and migratory patterns of certain species is used to protect stocks. Or how selective, low-impact gears are used to ensure untargeted species are not unintentionally caught and the seabed is not disturbed. Silencing fishers' voices is unfortunately too often the norm, not only in films like *Seaspiracy* but also in fisheries governance and management processes globally. This is a critical issue that many national and regional fishers' organizations and transnational movements, such as the World Forum of Fisher Peoples (WFFP) and the World Forum of Fish Harvesters and Fish Workers (WFF), have been speaking out about for decades.

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They argue that processes and decisions directly impacting fishers' lives and livelihoods should not be made without them. Fishers deserve a seat at the table when decisions are being made about the use and management of fisheries resources. As crucial contributors to the global food system, working directly with aquatic ecosystems, fishers' knowledge and experiences offer a wealth of information on how to ensure fishing can be both responsible and sustainable.

While *Seaspiracy* should be watched with a critical eye, its widespread popularity does present an opportunity to open up more public debate and expand discussions on fisheries, focusing on how to make the sector more sustainable, equitable, and how to uphold human rights. Like most other human activities, fishing does have negative impacts on oceans and inland waters. We need to keep working to find ways to address them and reduce their impacts, ensuring fisheries can continue to provide healthy food and livelihoods for generations to come. 🍴

#### **For more**

##### **Seaspiracy**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Q5CXN7soQg>

##### **Together against Pirates**

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_62/3746\\_art\\_Sam62\\_eng-art05.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_62/3746_art_Sam62_eng-art05.pdf)

##### **Pirates or Saviours of the Coast?**

[https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue\\_52/3294\\_art\\_ART03.pdf](https://www.icsf.net/images/samudra/pdf/english/issue_52/3294_art_ART03.pdf)