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Expert Task Force Recommends Halving Global Fishing for Crucial Prey Species

Forage Fish Twice as Valuable in the Water as in the Net

WASHINGTON – Fishing for sand eels, herring, and other "forage fish" in general should be cut in half globally to account for their critical role as food for larger species, recommends an expert group of marine scientists in a report released today. The Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force conducted the most comprehensive worldwide analysis of the science and management of forage fish populations to date. Its report, "Little Fish, Big Impact: Managing a crucial link in ocean food webs," concluded that in most ecosystems at least twice as many of these species should be left in the ocean as conventional practice.

A thriving marine ecosystem relies on plenty of forage fish, such as sardines and anchovies. These small schooling fish are a crucial link in ocean food webs because they eat tiny plants and animals, called plankton, and are preyed upon by animals such as penguins, whales, seals, puffins, and dolphins. They are primary food sources for many commercially and recreationally valuable fish found around Europe, such as tuna and cod. The task force estimated that, globally, these species are twice as valuable in the water as in a net—contributing US$11.3 billion (€8.5 billion) by serving as food for other commercially important fish. This is more than double the US$5.6 billion (€4.2 billion) they generate as direct catch.

"We have been managing fisheries for forage species in a manner that cannot sustain the food webs, or some of the industries, they support," says Dr. Ellen K. Pikitch of the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University in the United States, who convened and led the Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force. "As three-fourths of marine ecosystems in our study have predators highly dependent on forage fish, it is economically and biologically imperative that we develop smarter management for these small but significant species."

Forage fish are also a source of healthy omega-3 oils in the diets of people, and some fish oil is used in nutritional supplements for humans. Relatively small amounts, however, are used for direct human consumption. Their demand in recent decades has greatly increased for use as fish meal and fish oil to feed farmed fish, pigs, and chickens. Many common forage fish species in Europe, such as blue whiting, capelin, and sand eels, are used almost exclusively for fish meal.

"Our analysis found that the best way generally to ensure there's enough food for dependent predators is to reduce fishing for their prey," said Dr. Ian L. Boyd, professor and director of the NERC Sea Mammal Research Unit and the Scottish Oceans Institute at the University of St.

Andrews, and task force member. “We need to start to understand that leaving some types of fish in the water in greater numbers is not just good for ecosystems, but it is good economics, too.”

“The Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force utilized a wide range of scientific perspectives to find management solutions that will better sustain forage fish fisheries and the populations of predators that feed on them,” said Dr. Philippe Cury, senior scientist at the Institut de Recherche pour le Développement and director of the Centre de Recherche Halieutique Méditerranéenne et Tropicale in France, and task force member. “If governments use our recommendations to guide their management decisions, they will be adopting a more holistic and farsighted approach to achieve better stewardship of our oceans.”

Made up of 13 preeminent scientists with expertise in a wide range of disciplines, the Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force was established to generate specific and practical advice to support better management of forage fish around the world. This group of experts, with support from the Lenfest Ocean Program, synthesized scientific research and other information about these species and conducted original simulation modeling to reach their conclusions.

Find more information about:
Lenfest Forage Fish Task Force: *www.oceanconservationscience.org/foragefish*
Lenfest Ocean Program: *www.lenfestocean.org*

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The Lenfest Ocean Program supports scientific research aimed at forging solutions to the challenges facing the global marine environment. The program was established in 2004 by the Lenfest Foundation and is managed by the Pew Environment Group. www.LenfestOcean.org

The Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University is dedicated to advancing ocean conservation through science. The Institute transforms real-world policy while pursuing serious science, both of which are essential for ocean health.
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