



Press Release

World's forgotten fishes vital for hundreds of millions of people but one-third face extinction, warns new report

- *Freshwater fisheries provide food for 200 million people and livelihoods for 60 million*
- *Fisheries valued at over US\$38 billion, while recreational fishing generates US\$100 billion*
- *Freshwater fishes make up 51% of all fish species and ¼ of all vertebrate species on Earth*

Tuesday, 23 February – The world’s dazzlingly diverse freshwater fishes are critical for the health, food security and livelihoods of hundreds of millions of people, but they are under ever increasing threat with one in three already threatened with extinction, according to a report published today by 16 global conservation organizations.

World’s Forgotten Fishes details the extraordinary variety of freshwater fish species, with the latest discoveries taking the total to 18,075 – accounting for over half of all the world’s fish species and a quarter of all vertebrate species on Earth. This wealth of species is essential to the health of the world’s rivers, lakes and wetlands – and supports societies and economies across the globe.

Freshwater fisheries provide the main source of protein for 200 million people across Asia, Africa and South America, as well as jobs and livelihoods for 60 million people. Healthy freshwater fish stocks also sustain two huge global industries: recreational fishing generates over US\$100 billion annually, while aquarium fishes are the world’s most popular pets and drive a global trade worth up to US\$30 billion.

But freshwater fishes continue to be undervalued and overlooked – and thousands of species are now heading towards extinction. Freshwater biodiversity is declining at twice the rate of that in our oceans or forests. Indeed, 80 species of freshwater fish have already been declared ‘Extinct’ by the IUCN Red List of Threatened Species, including 16 in 2020 alone. Meanwhile, populations of migratory freshwater fish have fallen by 76 per cent since 1970 and mega-fish by a catastrophic 94 per cent.

“Nowhere is the world’s nature crisis more acute than in our rivers, lakes and wetlands, and the clearest indicator of the damage we are doing is the rapid decline in freshwater fish populations. They are the aquatic version of the canary in the coalmine, and we must heed the warning,” said Stuart Orr, WWF global Freshwater Lead. “Despite their importance to local communities and indigenous people across the globe, freshwater fish are invariably forgotten and not factored into

development decisions about hydropower dams or water use or building on floodplains. Freshwater fish matter to the health of people and the freshwater ecosystems that all people and all life on land depend on. It's time we remembered that."

The report highlights the devastating combination of threats facing freshwater ecosystems – and the fishes that live in them – including habitat destruction, hydropower dams on free flowing rivers, over abstraction of water for irrigation, and domestic, agricultural and industrial pollution. In addition, freshwater fishes are also at risk from overfishing and destructive fishing practices, the introduction of invasive non-native species and the impacts of climate change as well as unsustainable sand mining and wildlife crime. For example:

- The hilsa fishery in the Ganges upstream of Farakka crashed from a yield of 19 tonnes to just 1 tonne per year after the construction of the Farakka barrage in the 1970s;
- Poaching for illegal caviar is a key reason why sturgeons are one of the world's most threatened animal families, while Critically Endangered European eels are the most trafficked animal; and
- Excessively high fishing quotas in Russia's Amur river contributed to a catastrophic fall in the country's largest salmon run with no chum salmon found in spawning grounds in summer 2019.

There is a long list of threats, but there are also solutions – and 2021 offers real hope that the world can turn the tide and start to reverse decades of decline in freshwater fish populations. The world must seize the opportunity to secure an ambitious and implementable global biodiversity agreement at the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) conference in Kunming, China – one that must, for the first time, pay just as much attention to protecting and restoring our freshwater life support systems as the world's forests and oceans.

"While the situation of migratory fish is dire, there is hope. Our freshwater ecosystems have an astonishing ability to recover. Through a New Deal for the world's freshwater ecosystems, we can remove barriers such as obsolete dams, promote sustainable fishing practices, restore ecosystems, and safeguard the food, jobs and cultures of millions of people. We have the potential to see rivers full of fish once again," said Herman Wanningen, Director of World Fish Migration Foundation.

Specifically, this [New Deal for Nature and People](#) must build on the freshwater transition outlined in the [CBD's 5th Global Biodiversity Outlook](#), which echoes the 6-pillars of the WWF-led [Emergency Recovery Plan for freshwater biodiversity](#) - a comprehensive plan that can deliver solutions at the scale necessary to reverse the collapse in freshwater fish populations.

"What we need now is to recognize the value of freshwater fish and fisheries, and for governments to commit to new targets and solutions implementation, as well as prioritizing which freshwater ecosystems need protection and restoration. We also need to see partnerships and innovation through collective action involving governments, businesses, investors, civil society and communities," said Orr.

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Note to editors:

The report was published by Alliance for Freshwater Life, Alliance for Inland Fisheries, Conservation International, Fisheries Conservation Foundation, Freshwaters Illustrated, Global Wildlife Conservation, InFish, IUCN, IUCN SSC FFSG, Mahseer Trust, Shoal, Synchronicity Earth, The Nature Conservancy, World Fish Migration Foundation, WWF and Zoological Society of London.

The full report can be downloaded [here](#)

Photos can be downloaded [here](#)

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