

Policy 360-Episode 70 – Rethinking How Fisheries Contribute to Global Food Need

Kelly Brownell (KB): Hello and welcome to Policy 360. I'm Kelly Brownell, Dean of the Sanford School of Public Policy at Duke University. It's often said that one in ten people on the planet is hungry and that number is on the rise. At the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in 2015, more than 150 world leaders placed this issue, hunger, at the top of their agenda with an agreement to try to end hunger, achieve food security, improve nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture by 2030. That's an awful big bill. And that's a daunting goal because the global population will likely grow by two billion people over the next two decades. My guest today is Abigail Bennett. In 2017, Abby was an associate in research at the World Food Policy Center at Duke University, that's the center that I direct, and she's the lead author on a new report on the contribution of fisheries to food and nutrition security. Abby has served as a fellow at the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization and is a consultant to the World Bank. Welcome Abby.

Abby Bennett (AB): Thank you. It's great to be here.

KB: So, why is this report focused on fish and fisheries?

AB: Well, we focused on fish and fisheries, first and foremost, because we know that fisheries produce food. But how important is that food that they produce? And what we wanted to do was pull together the most recent data, policy information, and research on how important fisheries and the fish they produce actually are to food and food security and nutrition. And especially in the context of this sustainable development goal that you just mentioned. One other reason we wanted to focus on fisheries is because of all of the threats that fisheries currently face around overfishing, um, some threats from climate change. So we wanted to explore food security and nutrition as kind of one motivation potentially for dealing with these threats and investing from a policy perspective in addressing these threats.

KB: So, how important is fish as a source of protein, in particular?

AB: So, as a source of protein, fish is pretty important. At the global level, 17 percent of animal source protein is from fish. There are ten countries in the world that get more than 50 percent of their animal source protein from fish. And another fifteen or so, beyond those ten, that get above 30 percent of their animal source protein from fish. And then even below the national level, there are some specific communities and regions of the world that are just almost entirely dependent on fish. One good example is Brazil, which as a country doesn't look that dependent on fish for their protein, but there are communities in the Amazon that are almost 100 percent reliant on fish for protein.

KB: So, maybe I'm imagining that fisheries look quite a bit different depending on where in the world you are.

AB: Mm hmm.

KB: Can you talk about that a bit?

AB: Sure. So, one important distinction that we make are between large scale and small scale fisheries. And large scale fisheries are fisheries that typically use large fishing vessels, um, mechanized fishing gears, and they typically target a single species. On the other hand, we have small scale fisheries, which often use smaller vessels, or even shore based operations, and kind of more low tech gear, typically. And these fisheries harvest for both trade and household consumption and are particularly important for food security. Another really important distinction that we think about is between marine fisheries and inland fisheries. And often inland fisheries don't come to mind immediately when you think about fisheries, globally, but they can be really important. So, uh, some of the countries that are really dependent on fish for food security are landlocked countries, like Malawi, that depends largely on fish that come from Lake Malawi and inland fisheries.

KB: So, I can imagine there's a fundamental tension between wanting the world to have more fish because of its nutrition, uh, and because the oceans tend- are a vast resource. Um, pitted against the overfishing that's occurred and worries about the depletion of fishing stocks, how does that tension get acted out and how might it get resolved?

AB: Well, I think one fundamental aspect of that is that solving overfishing by improving the governance of fisheries is one pathway to improve food security and to continue to allow fisheries to contribute to the food security and nutrition that they already do. I think that they're also some interesting synergies that can be found by incorporating food security as an objective of fisheries and some of these may revolve around identifying new species that are highly nutritious but perhaps not the most commercially valuable.

KB: What does governance of the world's fisheries look like? I mean you have these vast oceans and who owns what and who controls what and how does that work?

AB: The governance of fisheries really varies from place to place and at different scales. So, some fish stocks can be governed really locally, especially if they're benthic or just living on the sea floor. Other fish stocks are highly mobile and require international governance. And a point that's really interesting to think about, too, is how governance may look different if our goal is food security or maximizing economic benefits.

KB: So, Abby are there specific reforms in governance that you think would be helpful?

AB: So, there are organizations like the Food and Agriculture Organization that have been working on issues of food security as they specifically relate to fisheries for a long time. One of the findings of this report is that many of the authors who are publishing works on fishers and food security have a sense that fisheries are underrepresented in the broader policy discourse on food security and nutrition and that that's something that needs to change. This is starting to change. So, for example, the global nutrition report in 2017 was one of the first to discuss fish. Uh, there is also, the voluntary guidelines for securing sustainable small scale fisheries in the context of poverty reduction in food securities and that's an instrument that was published by the FAO but created by a number of stakeholders and offers guidance on how to govern small scale fisheries. But specifically supports food security. But it seems that there's a lot of work that remains to be done in bringing fisheries more squarely into the food security and nutrition policy

dialogue and I think that's gonna depend on continuing to do research in that space and continuing to enhance the types of data and data sets that we have available to really understand fisheries contributions to food security and nutrition.

KB: Your observation is consistent with my own impression that in all the discussions that I've heard over the years about food and security and addressing that either nationally or globally, fisheries just never come up ever. I mean they're beginning to, which is a nice advance that you've mentioned. It's also true I think that in discussions of the sustainable production of food, let's just forget the raw amount you can produce in helping address food and security, but in sustainable production of food, fisheries don't come up in the discussions as much either. But it sounds like you're seeing trends in a positive direction. That now fisheries are showing up in these discussions and reports and that can take its proper place in the overall picture.

AB: I think that's true. And I think one thing is to talk about fish and its importance as a source of protein but it's really starting to emerge as an important source of micronutrients. So, many fish species are high in multiple vitamins, minerals, as well as omega 3 fatty acids. So, as the food security and nutrition dialogue starts to talk more about not only how do we feed people and give them the basic caloric intake that they need in dietary energy needs. But also how to nourish them and ensure that we address micro nutrient deficiencies. There's a bigger space opening up for fish there as an animal source food that's not only high in multiple micronutrients but also tends to be lower cost than other animal source foods.

KB: Well, this is an extremely interesting topic and I think people are gonna be hearing more and more about it. So, I'm delighted that you were able to produce the report, delighted with your work in general, and I wanna thank you again for joining us today.

AB: Thanks so much for having me.

KB: So, our guest today has been Abigail Bennet. Abby wrote the report we've been talking about while she was an associate in research at the World Food Policy Center at Duke University. We'll have a link to the report on our website, Policy360.org. The report was a collaboration between the Nicholas Institute for Environmental Policy Solutions and the World Food Policy Center at Duke University with the Environmental Defense Fund and the Duke University Marine Lab. Until next time, I'm Kelly Brownell.