



Published on *Marine Ecosystems and Management (MEAM)* (<https://meam.openchannels.org>)

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## Letter to the Editor: Marine conservation and sustainable food production are not on a collision course

Dear MEAM:

This letter is in response to Jake Rice's letter to the editor ([MEAM 7:1](#)) and the torrent of replies ([MEAM 7:2](#); [7:3](#)). The themes that have emerged, though valid (e.g., fisheries management is complicated, without silver bullets), appear to be missing the central point.

Marine conservation and food security, I would suggest, are only on a collision course under limited conditions. In today's world of increasingly depleted fisheries resources, the two will more often be on a converging course; i.e., with similar, rather than opposed objectives. (Aquaculture may be a different story, but space does not allow for that discussion here.)

Marine food resources are under pressure like never before. As a result, most fish stocks are no longer being fished in a fashion that maximizes either food security or biodiversity and ecosystem services, no matter how it is measured (maximum sustainable yield [MSY], maximum economic yield, optimum sustainable yield, etc.). [Editor's note: The unabridged version of this letter discusses a few exceptions to this trend and is available [here](#).]

Situations where stocks are fished beyond MSY etc. are not about food security at all, but rather ongoing *food insecurity*. Consider the very common situation where fish stocks are depleted beyond what they could ideally produce (often misleadingly labeled "fully exploited") but are still supporting fisheries in some fashion. In this common case, increasing fisheries catch would decrease the depressed stocks' production even further, thus further reducing both food security and conservation objectives. Therefore, both food security and conservation objectives are at this point more aligned than not. The "collision" is with the short-term economic security of those fishermen still managing to catch some fish and, in localized fisheries, with the provision of some food (at reduced levels) to the local population.

The above logic extends to the extreme example of stocks that are threatened or endangered. However, as we have seen with some tuna fisheries, that dire status has not stopped their continuing harvest. I would argue that it is short-term economic interests of a few, rather than food security for the many, at play.

This analysis is necessarily a simplification. While re-building fish stocks can (to some degree) address both food security and conservation, poverty alleviation requires different strategies, such as fair allocation, modifying fishing methods, re-training, etc. I do not wish to minimize or otherwise trivialize the multi-faceted considerations, and difficulty, of fisheries management today. However, to characterize these decisions as a trade-off between food security and conservation is, for the majority of cases, a false and misleading dichotomy.

Lastly, Jake alluded to the possibility that no matter how optimally conservation is implemented, it may not be enough to ensure global food security for Earth's burgeoning human population, particularly in a climate-changed world. I do agree that would amount to a collision course. Sooner or later Malthus - and his theory that the increase in human population will necessarily be limited by the means of subsistence - will be proved right. But when exactly that will happen has to date been elusive to predict. If some in our conversation here are predicting the end of the world, well fine, but in the meantime I think we should continue to try to better align fisheries with sustainability. Saying we have a problem is hardly news. Saying we can fix it, if we work with rather than against one another...well, that could be something worth reporting.

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