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Israeli prof. helps solve food crisis spawned by Nile perch

By Yuval Azoulay

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The Nile perch reigns supreme over Lake Victoria in Central Africa. The enormous predator, introduced by the British some 60 years ago, decimated native fish populations, especially the carp. It had an unparalleled ecological impact and led to severe malnutrition among the lakeside communities. Now, an Israeli ichthyologist is leading a project to restore the much-missed native species to the villagers' menus.

Bertha Sivan-Levavi, of the Hebrew University Faculty of Agriculture, was appalled when she first heard about the condition of the tribes dependent on the lake's depleted fishing stocks. Children in the communities around Victoria suffer from malnutrition and exhibit poor development and intellectual disabilities. Rampant heart ailments set the average life span at around 40. All this results from insufficient protein, which used to be plentiful in the native fish like carp but has largely disappeared from the local diet.

"For generations, each local family had a canoe. The father would take the canoe onto the lake and return a few hours later with a basket of carp. The women would cook the carp in plain water, and the families would have a nutritious meal. Now the carp are gone, and the already present hunger issue is only getting worse," said Sivan-Levavi. Advertisement

International aid organizations tried to help by replacing the old species on the menu with the new item but without success. The enormous Nile perch grew even larger in the lake, to an average weight of 120 kg., and the traditional canoes were not suited to fish in the deep waters that are the perch's habitat. While lakeside communities came close to starvation, industrialists used large boats to harvest an export catch; nearly every Nile perch served anywhere in the world comes from Lake Victoria.

"At first, I thought why not just take the perch out of the lake and reintroduce the original species?" Sivan-Levavi told Haaretz. "But this was naive." The Israeli, with a colleague from Uganda's Makerere University, Dr. Justus Rutaisire, conducted a survey of the lake and found that if anything, things were going to get worse. "The perch have gobbled everything else in the lake, and were left with nothing else to eat," said Sivan-Levavi. "In the last few years, large fish began losing up to half of their weight. This brought distress to the fishing industry as well."

In her travels along the Ugandan side of the lake, she began looking for a

solution suitable for the more distant villages, built of mud and wood and without electricity or running water. She decided to get the local communities interested in setting up artificial fish ponds to raise carp. The younger villagers didn't know what she was talking about; they were born after the carp disappeared from their diet. "They were very suspicious at first, and some villages even chased us away," she said. "Only a few people were interested, but this was enough to get the work going. We collected African carp from rivers feeding the lake and put them in fish ponds we dug in the villages. The carp are thriving there. They're not picky. They spawn all year long. And the locals now have something to eat."

Word of the success of the Israeli and Ugandan researchers spread, and soon even the tribes who had chased the scientists away came to join the program. The United States Agency for International Development was impressed enough to sponsor the digging of the ponds and even sent four villagers to Kibbutz Hama'apil in Emek Hefer to learn about techniques for encouraging spawning.

The graduates of the training program returned to their villages and set up carp farms, taking the fingerlings to other tribes in the area. "Because the aquifers are full, digging the ponds is pretty easy. They're not very big, about the size of an average backyard, and you don't need to do maintenance or to feed the fish. All you need to do is walk up to the pool, catch yourself a fish, cook it and eat. The most important thing is that they get their proteins," said Sivan-Levavi.

Now she has new goals - expanding the fishing ponds to other countries around the lake (Kenya, Rwanda and Tanzania); to train more students in fish-raising methods developed in the West; and then to save the Nile perch, which are starving after having eaten everything there was to eat. The World Bank is supporting a project in which Sivan-Levavi is a partner, which aims to domesticate the gluttonous fish and raise it in artificial pools.

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