

Program Script for Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı (Aired on 25 October 2009)

Category: Environment and Economic Development

Location: Van

Ice-cold rivers are flowing under historical bridges, through lush green mountains. Their destination is the blue waters of Lake Van.

Like a rebel, a fish tries to make its way against the tide. Facing great obstacles, it tries to overcome the current and reach the source of the river. And it succeeds.

This rebellious fish is called the “pearl mullet”, also known as the “Van Fish”.

The only place in the world where the pearl mullet can be found is Lake Van. And the only type of fish that can be found in Lake Van is the pearl mullet.

The pearl mullet shines like a pearl in Lake Van, finding its beauty in solitude.

The pearl mullet is the only species of fish that can live in the salty waters of Lake Van. However, during spawning season, they have to migrate toward rivers that lead to Lake Van, as the seed fish cannot survive in salty waters.

This is not an easy journey, however. They have to swim against the tide for many kilometres, overcome the current and reach the source of the river in order to harvest their eggs. While their eggs transform into new fish in fresh water, the pearl mullet starts their journey back to Lake Van.

This story illustrates the perfection and balance of nature. In fact, what makes this story perfect is the fact that nature carries out its own law without any human interference.

However, as human beings started producing ideas that go against the laws and balance of nature, they became the most significant obstacle for pearl mullets in their journey which is already full of challenges.

Just as the waters of Lake Van give life to the pearl mullet, these fish give life to the city’s economy. Approximately 15.000 people living in the Lake Van area make a living by fishing.

The pearl mullet serves as a bridge of hope for the fishermen and fishmongers of Van, where unemployment rates are very high.

Although the pearl mullet gives hope to the people of Van, hazardous methods of fishing are threatening to take away that bit of hope.

Until 10 years ago, there were no legal regulations or restrictions for fishing in Lake Van.

According to the fisherman, fishing was even taking place during spawning season, as nobody was complying with the fishing ban.

As soon as the pearl mullet would reach the rivers, villagers would catch them with buckets, nets and sometimes even plastic bags and prevent them from nesting their eggs.

According to research conducted in 1996, 90% of all fishing in Lake Van was done illegally.

This meant that during June when the spawning season started and the fishing ban should be in effect the pearl mullet were caught and prevented from nesting their eggs.

Interview with an illegal fisherman:

Fisherman: “They were fishing with seiner boats. They would pull out more than 20 tons, even 100 tons of fish per day.”

Interview with another illegal fisherman:

Fisherman: “In the past, we were using methods for fishing that were causing harm-mostly due to our lack of knowledge about the harmful effects. Even fishers from different cities would come here for the pearl mullet. Because Lake Van is the only place in the world where that fish lives.

We used wrong methods. We would cut their journey as soon as they headed towards the rivers. We would use nets of 300-400 metres and catch them until there was none left.”

12.000 tons of a total of 15.000 fish caught in a season were caught during spawning time and as the fish could not nest their eggs, they were quickly becoming extinct.

However, the people of Van who were consuming the fish, nor the fishermen, were really aware of the danger. Illegal fishing was driving the pearl mullet to extinction as well as lowering the value of the fish.

Interview with a fishmonger:

Fishmonger: “The earlier fishing methods were a bit primitive. Everyone who had a net, a vehicle or a house near the lake could go fishing, and sell the fish in different places of the city.

The fish were coming in semi-trailers and horse carriages. 100 semi-trailers of fish were brought per day. 1 kilo of pearl mullet would cost around 8 cents US.

The fish would be brought in semi-trailers, in bags, on horses, donkeys....

Interview with a fisherman:

Fisherman: “There were bans and everyone knew about them. But nobody cared. Back in the day, we would catch as much as we could and try to sell as much as we could. We would give away the surplus for free. If there were still some left, we would dump them on the fields or salt them (a preservation technique).”

In 1992, this ill fate of the fishermen of Van and of the pearl mullet suddenly started to change.

An idealist academician who just started teaching at the University of Van decided to make a difference when he realized the terrible situation facing the pearl mullet.

A native of Tokat, Mustafa Sarı decided to work as an academician once he graduated from university in Ankara. As soon as he received an offer from the University of Van, he accepted it without any hesitation and started working at the Aquaculture Faculty.

And he moved to Van with the thought that ‘every university in Turkey is of great value’ and during times when everybody was hesitant to work there due to terrorism.

Mustafa Sarı focused on Lake Van during times when human security was the priority and decided to do something about the harmful methods of fishing in Lake Van.

Interview with Prof.Dr. Mustafa Sarı:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı: “The situation was absolutely terrible. During times of migration, the state was practically tendering the rivers. These rivers were put out to tender even during spawning season. People were fishing excessively. It was only at the end of the season when people had enough of fishing that they would obey the law and fish legally.

Fishing was so excessive that trucks loaded with 20-25 tons of fish would park in front of the Governorship building and sell them.

While trucks were making their way over, yellow pearl mullet eggs would spill on to the roadside. This was unacceptable. We thought that the fish population could face extinction in a couple of years if this approach to fishing persisted.”

Mustafa Sarı conducted research on the potential extinction of the pearl mullet and tried to warn the authorities regarding necessary measures that needed to be taken.

15.000 tons of fish were caught in Lake Van where the upper limit was supposed to be 8.000 tons and nobody was doing anything about it.

Mustafa Sarı’s studies were ignored due to bureaucracy and he started to lose hope in the face of the difficulties he faced.

Interview with Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı: “When I first raised the subject to the Governor, he said “Dear Teacher; I am trying to secure the safety of our citizens (in the face of terror) and you’re talking to me about the safety of fish! I am trying to provide people with security. And you are here talking to me about fish” He added: “First let’s achieve security of our people; then we can move on to saving the fish”

The Head of the Agricultural Board told me that I was a stranger to Van, inexperienced and too young to worry about these things. He also told me a story about how he sent one of his engineers to catch the illegal fishmongers. He went and caught them; and was appointed to Ankara the next day.

The Municipality also said that they cannot do anything about it. They told me the story of how an officer was hit in the head by a 5 kilo fish by the fishmongers when he warned them of illegal fishing.

I tried to learn the name of the engineer who was sent to Ankara and the officer who was hit in the head, but I could not. Because they made these legends up themselves.”

During critical times when the state was focused on security issues, Mustafa Sarı decided to approach the public instead. He traveled from village to village with his own car, trying to explain to the villagers that the pearl mullet was facing extinction.

He did not get a positive reaction, however.

The villagers did not believe what he said, and they even threatened him to move out of their way.

Interview with Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sarı: “They treated me very well during my first 1.5 years. They constantly complimented me and I went fishing with them and offered them advice. But they never gave me any information. They complimented me but never gave me any information. They never opposed anything I said. They said ‘yes’ to everything and avoided confrontation.

1,5 years later, they started asking me when I was going to leave and where to. They told me “You are supposed to leave, you spent almost 2 years here, you will get appointed to somewhere else”. I told them I was staying.

They were all surprised. And one day, one of them came to talk to me. He said: “You are a good person. But this place is not safe, something may happen to you. You also have kids. Go home and drink your tea and coffee. You are a teacher, so sit in your room. What are you doing here? Do not worry about these things. You cannot change how things work. You cannot know what being poor is like.”

And I told them: “If you insist on fishing at the pace you are now, you will be unable to make any profit in 5-10 years.”

In 1997, even the fish started to react against the fishing methods. The amount of fish started to decrease, the size of the fish and the income of the fishermen were becoming smaller and smaller.

That year, even the fishermen saw the real danger I had told them about for the first time. And they started listening to Mustafa Sarı, whom they knew would never give up on the issue.

Interview with a fishmonger:

Fishmonger: “We assumed that these fish were our Godsend and would never face extinction. In 1993, we realized it was not the case.

The Lake ran out of fish. I could barely catch 20 kilograms of fish with a 5,000-metre net. Nowadays, I catch 1 tons with the same net. We believed that we would never run out of fish. But in 1993, we realized we were wrong.

Mustafa Sarı showed us great support. The university provided us with the necessary information and means to fish properly. We overcame the challenges in solidarity.”

Villagers who realized that the pearl mullet was facing the danger of extinction, started to believe in Mustafa Sarı.

3 villages in the surroundings of Lake Van declared that they would implement Mustafa Sarı’s project.

They reduced illegal fishing and stopped fishing extensively during the spawning season so that the fish could reproduce.

After implementing the project, they realized the mistakes they used to make and witnessed a change for the better.

Interview with a fisherman:

Fisherman: “In 1997, the Lake literally ran out of fish. I could barely catch 4-5 kilograms of fish using a 4000-metre-wide net. We almost went bankrupt.

This year, however, they were times I caught 1 tons with the same net.”

Mustafa Sari’s second step was to get the local authorities involved. Supported by the villagers, he mobilized the Ministry of Agriculture, the Governorship and the Gendarmerie.

He tried to involve everyone, including NGOs, in the process of educating the public and supervising proper fishing methods.

Interview with Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sari:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sari: “We worked very hard to set up legal regulations. The fishing bans were implemented at different times of the year. So firstly, we amalgamated the dates. First, we moved the start of the fishing ban back to May 15th, then to April 15th. The authorities slowly started to take legal actions against illegal fishing during spawning season.

The Gendarmerie got involved. For the first time ever in Turkey, the Gendarmerie donated a boat for the supervision of fishing in the lake.”

At this point, Mustafa Sari managed to educate even larger crowds of people with the support of the funding he received from various NGOs.

He handed out pamphlets and booklets in the villages. He tried to raise awareness about the issue on local TV channels.

He tried to create a brand for the Van Fish with a marketing project. He provided sustainability for his project as he founded the Nature Watch Foundation.

After long years of hard work, he finally started to witness a change for the better.

Interview with Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sari:

Prof. Dr. Mustafa Sari: “Currently, we are standing at a very good point after dedicating 17 years to this project.

We are not very accustomed to this type of news in Turkey. We hear that some species is facing the danger of extinction. And then sometime later, we hear that it in fact did go extinct. We do not have many stories about a species being saved from extinction, especially if that species is serving someone’s economic benefit.

We changed that ill fate with the pearl mullet.”

In 1996, the financial turnover of fishing in Lake Van was 3.5 million USD. However, after the implementation of proper methods, it now amounts to 10 million USD.

The income of fishermen tripled, while the average size of a pearl mullet increased from 16.5 to 20 cm.

After the implementation of new policies and methods:

The number of active fishing boats besides spawning season increased from 100 to 160.

The number of fishing boats insisting on fishing illicitly during spawning season decreased from 92 to 40.

The pearl mullet is saved from extinction for now. And people in various cities of Turkey started to consume Van Fish.

Just like the pearl mullet, Mustafa Sarı tried to make his way against the current.

And again, just like the pearl mullet, he never gave up during his struggle. He overcame the obstacles and kept going forward.

In order to save a fish species and raise awareness among fishermen, he never gave up on his ideals.

He dedicated himself to his struggle and made a difference in the lives of thousands of people and also in the heart of the nature.