

## Eat More Fish (Responsibly)

By Alicia Armeli

Imagine if we created a machine that could produce half the world's oxygen. A device that was able to provide fresh water and nourishment to billions of people worldwide. Picture an invention so efficient it could do all this while simultaneously absorbing a third of the carbon emissions we produce. If you think we're millennia away from such a discovery, think again. Our oceans do all of this and more.<sup>1 2</sup>

Human existence depends on the health of our oceans, but with 90% of the world's fish stocks entirely exploited or depleted<sup>3</sup>, it's necessary we know how to consume fish responsibly so these resources can be sustained and enjoyed by future generations to come.

### **Fish as Food: Feeding the Globe**

Every day, we're encouraged to eat more fish. The American Heart Association recommends we eat fish at least twice a week.<sup>4</sup> And the benefits are clear. Not only is it a rich source of protein, fish also provides essential fatty acids, fat-soluble vitamins such as vitamin D and trace minerals like selenium and copper.<sup>5</sup> A study published in the *American Journal of Preventative Medicine* found that weekly consumption of fish was associated with larger gray matter volumes in the brain, particularly the hippocampus<sup>6</sup>—an area responsible for memory and one of the regions known to shrink in age-related dementia disorders like Alzheimer's.<sup>7</sup>

Worldwide, fish accounts for nearly 20% of high-quality protein intake for approximately 3 billion people and represents 6.5 percent of overall protein consumed.<sup>2</sup> "About 1 billion people largely in developing countries rely on fish as their primary animal protein source," reports the Marine Stewardship Council. "In general, people in developing countries and especially those in coastal areas are much more dependent on fish as a staple food than those in the developed world."<sup>8</sup>

### **The Dangers of Overfishing**

Growing consumer popularity in combination with lack of global management and greed has created the most dangerous threat our oceans face—overfishing.<sup>9</sup> According to the Convention on Biological Diversity, "The threat to species and ecosystems has never been so great as it is today. Species extinction caused by human activities continues at an alarming rate."<sup>10</sup>

Overfishing refers to catching fish faster than they can reproduce. This is especially an issue for larger or deepwater species like Orange Roughy that live longer but are slower to mature and produce offspring. When certain species are exploited or depleted, as seen with overfishing, it causes a chain reaction of collapse that affects other species. Tipping the balance, overfishing also leaves entire ecosystems vulnerable to other threats like pollution and disease.

### **Wild Caught or Farmed?**

It's a misconception that farmed fish are a safe alternative to wild caught and will lighten the load of its dwindling counterpart. Although the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA) and other government agencies regulate domestic- and foreign-farmed fish, reports expose farms raising fish in deplorable conditions. Crowded nets and cages surround fish swimming in their own waste. To offset the contamination and shock of an environment

different from their natural habitat, fish are treated with antibiotics and hormones—both of which can then flow directly into the ocean. Studies have shown that farmed fish can have higher levels of contaminants that may increase cancer risks for consumers.<sup>11</sup>

Because farmed fish are mass-produced at a reduced cost, the livelihoods of small fishing communities suffer. Fish are offered at a lower price to the consumer but at a heavy economic expense to those who rely on aquatic resources the most.<sup>11</sup>

### **Teach a Man to Fish (Responsibly) & Feed Him For a Lifetime**

When purchasing fish, use the following guidelines to help you make sustainable choices.

#### *Know Your Fish*

Knowing which fish to eat and which to avoid is the first step. Even though you may see popular fish like Bluefin Tuna, Swordfish, Shark, and Atlantic Halibut on a menu, consuming these species could be inadvertently contributing to their collapse. This also includes fish products and other seafood like Sturgeon caviar and Tiger Prawn.<sup>12</sup>

Sustainable alternatives include Yellowfin Tuna, Alaska Pollock, Sardines, Scallops, and Coldwater Prawns. For full lists of endangered and sustainable fish, download the [Marine Conservation Society app or Pocket Good Fish Guide](#) or use the [Monterey Bay Aquarium Sustainable Seafood Search](#).

#### *Eat Lower on the Food Chain*

Smaller fish like sardines reach maturity and reproduce quickly in comparison to larger fish. These types of fish are more plentiful in number and contain less mercury in comparison to larger fish higher on the food chain.<sup>13</sup>

#### *Go Local*

Eating locally sourced food isn't reserved for meat and produce alone. Check public advisories about the safety of locally caught fish and familiarize yourself with fishing methods used. Ask local fisheries about seasonal breeding and spawning times to avoid purchasing fish at their most delicate state. If sustainable locally sourced wild-caught fish isn't an option, look for the blue Certified Sustainable MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) or green Farmed Responsibly ASC (Aquaculture Stewardship Council) Certified labels.<sup>12</sup>

"We need to vastly improve the way we fish so it is not wasteful and damaging," explains Greenpeace International. "But first we urgently need to stop taking fish faster than our oceans can replenish."<sup>14</sup>

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Links:

<http://www.fishonline.org/information/Pocket+goodfishguide>

<http://www.seafoodwatch.org/>

