



OPINION: "See Food" Differently - Fish Are Wildlife, Too posted on 01/31/05

By Jennifer Jacquet, AquaNews Correspondent



Shark fin soup may be a cultural staple, but according to seafood guides, it's an ecological no-no.

Photo: Vancouver Aquarium

If governments will not save the world's oceans, then consumers will – at least, this is the hope of many conservation groups working to help seafood lovers make responsible seafood choices. One such group is the Monterey Bay Aquarium's [Seafood Watch program](#), which publishes regional guides to sustainable seafood for several U.S. markets.

Their message: put a fork in rainbow trout, but put a sock in buying red snapper. Under this advice, many consumers are realizing that although eating overfished species such as orange roughy is politically legal, it is politically incorrect.

Since the advent of industrial fishing, ninety percent of the biomass of large predatory fish has disappeared from our oceans. Yet humans continue to eat more fish, imperiled bluefin tuna and Atlantic halibut grace the menus of many restaurants, and fishery production increases as technology reveals the last unexploited ocean hideouts.

In the absence of enough political will and legislation to protect the seas, conservationists are turning to consumers' pocketbooks as the most powerful avenue of persuasion.

Dr. Daniel Pauly, Director of the [Fisheries Centre](#) at the University of British Columbia, helped in the nascent phase of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program to raise consumer awareness about unsustainable fishing practices. But he does not like to focus on the battle cry of consumer power and influence.

"They say these food guides are a way to get people to reflect on their relationship with the sea," said Pauly. "Even though I agree with my head with the notion that [seafood guides] are perhaps useful, with my heart I don't. I don't like the notion of us managing resources with our stomachs. I think we should be managing them with our head."

Pauly believes that consumers have difficulty understanding that fish are wildlife and should be managed as such. "Most people do not perceive fish as wildlife," he said. "I guess that's one thing that the conservation community has failed to get across."

Pauly would like to see efforts focused on influencing government regulation that would curtail fishing effort, eliminate subsidies to the fishing industry, and protect spawning grounds as marine reserves.

"I don't like the notion of us being reduced or engaged mainly as consumers rather than as a citizen," explained Pauly. "I like the notion of citizenry with people actively trying to influence democracy and our elected representatives. We have to have other ways of interacting with nature than through our stomachs."

Source: Vancouver Aquarium Marine Science Centre



Jennifer Jacquet is a freelance writer and environmental economist.

Her work focuses on open-access resources, particularly the dilemmas facing the marine environment.