

by Kit Newkirk

April 25, 2007

Old Pappy is my nickname for a big fish who lived until recently in the dark and the cold at the floor of the Atlantic Ocean. Pappy was born during the Ulysses S. Grant administration, when elegant schooners sailed. We're not sure where he spent his youth. But he probably didn't reach maturity until he was around 34 years old.

Some time around the Teddy Roosevelt administration, Pappy settled into life at the bottom. He had been hanging sluggishly around undersea canyons, seamounts and coral reefs ever since.

He schooled with others of his species in preferred hydrologic conditions ranging between 38 and 49 degrees, around 3,600 feet below sea level.

When active, his reddish body showed off his big black pupils. But when he settled inactive at the bottom in the chilly water, much of his pigment would disappear.

Pappy got more or less steadily bigger on a diet of zooplankton, shrimp, crustaceans and such. When large enough, he'd occasionally take a smaller fish or squid. He eventually reached two feet long and 15 pounds.

After living more than 130 years, Pappy was recently scooped up by a giant fishing trawler. In one swoop, the fishermen also eradicated a 2,000-year-old cold-water coral reef. The trawlers won't be back, because the fish won't be back. Not only was their hangout destroyed, but also slow-growing fish like Pappy are being harvested faster than they can replenish their populations. Cold-water coral reefs are even slower to regrow.

Until a couple of decades ago, Pappy and others of his species were commonly considered junk fish called "slimeheads." But then fishers around New Zealand found a large population of slimeheads and reframed them as a culinary delicacy, setting off a feeding frenzy on the fish.

According to scientists speaking at this year's meeting of the American Association for Advancement of Science, some deep-water fishermen are "bandits roaming on the high seas," engaged in serial depletion of the deep-sea fisheries, not to feed poor people but, rather, for luxury markets.

Saying the damage is out of proportion to the economic value of the deep-sea fisheries markets, the scientists called for an end to fuel subsidies for deep-sea fishing.

Fuel subsidies – from countries like Japan, South Korea, Russia and Spain – enable vessels to travel beyond 200-mile national boundaries and drag heavy chains across the sea floor.

Without subsidies, the fleets would be economically unviable, according to economist Rashid Sumaila of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre.

Putting an end to government subsidies is an appealing idea, but last year the UN failed to pass a ban on unregulated deep-sea fishing.

As long as governments are unwilling or unable to act globally, at least I can act locally. I hope you will join me over dinner.

Whether he's dressed in tarragon and capers or tomato-cilantro salsa, no matter how lavishly gourmets may praise his firm, tasty, white flesh, if you see Pappy on the menu, please turn the page.

Old Pappy will be listed on the menu under his species' common name: "orange roughy."

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