



The Toothfish that Bit Al Gore

Chilean sea bass: overfished, confusing, and political dynamite.

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Al Gore's appetite was the subject of recent controversy when he was accused of scarfing down Chilean sea bass at his daughter's Beverly Hills wedding rehearsal dinner. Chilean sea bass, officially named Patagonian toothfish, is heavily overfished in Antarctic waters. For Gore, the toothfish was also a public relations nightmare. First came the accusations of hypocrisy and eco-obliviousness, including my own at the [Shifting Baselines blog](#), and then rumours that the Gore family had not actually eaten the fish, and then the final sigh of relief from Gore supporters when the Daily Telegraph retracted their blow and reported the Chilean sea bass actually was "caught and documented in compliance with the Marine Stewardship Council" (though it is not clear the fish was MSC-certified).

Political hack job? Sloppy journalism? One thing is certain: Gore's character assassination was fueled by a confusion rampant in today's global seafood market.

"We did not co-evolve with fish the way we co-evolved with mammals," says Daniel Pauly at the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre. "Therefore, we cannot wrap our minds around fish or our hearts around them either." Perhaps for this reason, our primary way of conserving fisheries over the last decade has been through our stomachs.

Expensive campaigns

From 1999 to 2004, the Seafood Choices Alliance alone has invested \$37 million US in seafood consumer awareness campaigns, partially out of exasperation with the government's failure to regulate fisheries or seafood imports. These campaigns aim to educate consumers about fisheries issues and also to empower them to make a difference in the market. If only collapsed fish stocks were increasing at the same rate as these market-based initiatives. Instead, what seems to be growing is the web of complex messages and the number of confused consumers.

The 2007 "Seafood Watch" wallet card from Monterey Bay Aquarium lists tuna 12 different times (i.e., species, method of fishing, country) between the three columns of best choices, good alternatives, and avoid. But most tuna consumers are not aware that there are nine tuna species and often do not know the meaning of "troll-caught." Though these complexities reflect the reality of the global seafood market, they also overwhelm the average tuna shopper.

Similarly, the aim of Canada's Living Ocean Society's "Farmed and Dangerous" campaign is to convince consumers not to eat farmed salmon. But several studies over the past few years indicate that retailers frequently mislabel farmed salmon as "wild caught." Studies from the U.S. have shown as much as three-quarters of the "wild" salmon sampled were actually farmed. How meaningful is a boycott of farmed salmon if they pose in the market as wild?

Toothfish. Sea bass. Confused?

But no fish exhibits the mass confusion possible in today's global seafood market better than the Patagonian toothfish, renamed Chilean sea bass by the Los Angeles fish merchant who discovered its market potential in North America. Sales of Chilean sea bass increased through the 1980s as word spread that the fish flesh was virtually indestructible and could take on any flavor. In the 1990s Chilean sea bass became a best seller and chefs simply could not get enough of the oily fish. There was a reason for that; by the late 1990s, many stocks of toothfish had collapsed.

The Convention of Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (signed in 1982 and the only recognized power over these southern fish) set harvest levels but, in 1999, an estimated 80 percent of Patagonian toothfish sold were illegally caught. That same year, Whole Foods, an eco-friendly grocery chain in the U.S., discontinued Chilean sea bass. (The chain thought it would pre-empt government action but the government did not act.) Meanwhile, fishing boats began targeting Antarctic toothfish, a relative of Patagonian toothfish, and sold it as Chilean sea bass, too.

In 2001, U.S. law enforcers caught several toothfish pirates, one of whom was smuggling two tonnes of toothfish under a thin layer of crayfish. That same year, Bon Appétit magazine named Chilean sea bass the "Dish of the Year." Less than one year later, in February 2002, the D.C.-based National Environmental Trust (NET) launched the "Take a Pass on Chilean Sea Bass" campaign, which encouraged a boycott of the fish. The government next door mustered its energy to adopt NET's request that toothfish landings had legitimate paperwork (though they denied their appeal to get rid of the ambiguous title "frozen fish fillet," under which many illegal toothfish enter the U.S.). Wal-Mart, ever known for its social conscience, discontinued Chilean sea bass from its shelves in 2003. In the meantime, Bruce Knecht wrote his book about rampant toothfish piracy. And then...

Mixed messages

In 2006, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certified 4000 tonnes of

Patagonian toothfish off the South Georgian Islands, Antarctica. In October last year, Whole Foods reintroduced the MSC-bass. In January this year, Wal-Mart followed. Within weeks, a scientist working off Antarctica's Ross Ice Shelf reported seeing pirate vessels fishing for toothfish. From "Dish of the Year" to, less than one year later, a boycott. From de-shelved to re-shelved and legal to illegal. From threatened to MSC-certified (yet, still threatened). Amidst the mixed and remixed messages, how can consumers or journalists covering the Gore wedding stay afloat of the toothfish crisis let alone the fisheries crisis as a whole?

They cannot. And so seafood awareness campaigns risk ineffectiveness due to information complexity and overload. More important, these campaigns hold as their axiom individual consumption rather than collective action (likely because that is what consumers are comfortable with). The Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program continues to grow and to encourage restaurants to sell sustainable fish. The "success" of Ocean Wise is a stark contrast to Canada's 2006 refusal to sign the UN high seas trawling ban. Having all but abandoned their mandate to protect fisheries resources, national governments are content that individuals do what they can to save fisheries -- the nations' leaders have more important things to discuss. But the liability in accepting consumerism rather than citizenship as the predominant form of fisheries conservation shows a dearth of results.

At present, the complicated messages of seafood conservation efforts -- not to mention the counter-marketing strategies by industry, the self-serving eco-labels and the mislabeling of species -- undermine the integrity and effectiveness of these market-based initiatives. For these programs to have a hope at obtaining their desired outcomes (including improving the ecological health of fisheries), seafood consumers must receive simple and accurate information followed by a clear and convincing call to act. And their actions must elicit transparent results on the water.

It is possible. In 1989, Sam LaBudde went undercover, videotaped the dolphin slaughter onboard Mexican tuna vessels, and turned the footage into a news piece. Overnight, he revolutionized public sentiments toward tuna fishing and became the accidental father of new regulations and the dolphin-safe logo. But subsequent seafood consumer campaigns, as evidenced by Chilean sea bass, have had less success.

After nearly 10 years of investment, fisheries conservationists should consider re-strategizing buyer-oriented campaigns, and not just for the sake of Al Gore's reputation. Otherwise, just as consumers experienced fatigue in the 1990s after corporate eco-advertising and spending on public relations amounted to little action or outcome, so might this decade witness the same fatigue in terms of seafood awareness campaigns.

The "greenwash" corporations were accused of in the 1990s could turn to a "bluewash" accusation of fisheries and ocean conservation groups today. The difference, of course, is that conservation groups have the interest of fisheries and the environment firmly at heart while corporations never did -- a difference consumers might be too confused to realize.

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