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## Fish stories: Dwindling fish, fish as fish food, best fish to eat

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October 28th, 2008 · [No Comments](#)

By [Barbara Kessler](#)

Concerns about the loss of aquatic life, including the fish we eat, have rippled around the globe this year with warnings about the loss of certain salmon, the Alaskan Pollock (the fish sticks fish) and of course sharks, which are becoming endangered at alarming rates.

This week brought more hard to digest news, that mountains of edible saltwater fish are being ground up and turned into animal food, for farm-raised fish, chickens and pigs, no less. This raises so many questions that it would be difficult to list them all here. But let's start with: "What happens when pigs and chickens are forcibly turned into carnivores?" and "We're catching fish to feed fish, really?"

"It defies reason to drain the ocean of small, wild fishes that could be directly consumed by people in order to produce a lesser quantity of farmed fish," said Dr. Ellen K. Pikitch, executive director of the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science and a professor at Stony Brook University's School of Marine and Atmospheric Sciences, one sponsor of the study "Forage Fish: From Ecosystems to Markets".

The study found that some 31 million tons of forage fish are being taken from the oceans every year, and more than 90 percent of that haul is ground up into meal for farmed fish, pigs and poultry.

The practice, which is not well managed, could have far reaching effects.

"Skyrocketing pressure on small wild fishes," Dr. Pikitch said, "may be putting entire marine food webs at great risk."

Because I eat primarily vegetables and fish, but not other meats, I've been hyper-attuned to these recent stories.

I fear that overfishing is an issue that's just washing over the public, one more dire earth-related concern on a crowded plate, no pun intended. It's a straightforward concept: We're harvesting too many fish, in too many places, and by the time that overfishing crosses the bounds of sustainability, the fishery can be on the verge of collapse. That's the concern in the case of the Alaskan Pollock. Scientists believe that years of bounty could be followed by a sudden collapse of this vital food source. And to compound matters for the U.S. fishing businesses, climate change is driving the Alaskan Pollock to migrate northward into Russian seas.

You don't need an ecology course to see how these losses can shred whole ecosystems. Even in the case of the forage fish, which we don't consider suitable for a human lunch or dinner, the pain travels resoundingly up the food chain.

"We must find a better way to manage forage fisheries before we cause irreversible damage to the broader ocean environment which depends on them as a food source," said Joshua Reichert, managing director of the Pew Environment Group, another sponsor of the Sea Around Us. "Human beings are not the only, or necessarily, the most important consumer of these fish. Whatever people take out of the sea needs to be carefully calibrated to ensure that sufficient fish are left to sustain populations of other fish, seabirds and marine mammals which all play a major role in the healthy functioning of the world's oceans."

One way to become a better steward of the oceans is to be a more mindful gourmet. Whether cooking or eating out, we can all try to consume fish that are responsibly farmed or harvested in the wild.

Environmental Defense, a Washington policy and conservation group, has produced three lists to guide your choices: [The top "Eco-Best," the "Eco-OK" and "Eco-Worst" lists](#) take into account the size of marine life population, pollution and fishing techniques.

Here's the top 10 Eco Best List. Tape it to your pantry door and flip to this [page](#) on the ED website for recipes. Enjoy these (and don't be a pig about it, because well, the pigs... we'll come back to that one).

Anchovies  
Char, Arctic (farmed)  
Mackerel, Atlantic  
Mussels  
Oysters (farmed)

Sablefish (Alaska, Canada)  
Salmon, wild (Alaska)  
Sardines, Pacific (U.S.)  
Trout, rainbow (farmed)  
Tuna, albacore (U.S., Canada)

(The study, "Forage Fish: From Ecosystems to Markets," is a product of the nine-year [Sea Around Us Project](#), a partnership between the University of British Columbia in Vancouver and The Pew Charitable Trusts. The Sea Around Us Project has been primarily funded by the Pew Institute for Ocean Science, which is now the Institute for Ocean Conservation Science at Stony Brook University.)

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