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January 14th, 2010 By Stacey Slate



In 2007, a research vessel stationed off the coast of eastern Canada cast two fishing lines, each with 1,500 hooks, in order to estimate how many cod were left in this region’s waters. They caught only a few fish. Eleven years earlier, Canadian Prime Minister Brian Mulroney had declared a moratorium on cod fishing with the goal of rebuilding the species’ population back to a secure, if not profitable, number. The Arctic cod population, like that of Western Atlantic bluefin tuna, Chesapeake Bay scalloped hammerhead shark, Atlantic salmon, North Sea haddock, Southern Atlantic snowy grouper, East Gulf of Mexico red snapper and American plaice, is reaching what director Rupert Murray foresees as “the end of the line.” His [so-titled documentary](#) examines the decline of our ocean’s diverse species while proposing immediate solutions.

His film gives us the chance to see what the ocean actually looks like and how it is affected by industrial fishing. Murray frequently returns to frames of our oceans’ surface waters—their vastness extends toward an infinite horizon line. We witness fishermen from Senegal and the Strait of Gibraltar pull netted fish from the water, we see images of bounty, and we begin to reckon the sheer mass of fish killed. There are recurring images of hooks, blood and swarming catches. Anchovies are processed for fishmeal—the pile of dead fish appears limitless.

These images reappear variously in many local landscapes documented. Halifax, Alaska, London, Tokyo, Hong Kong, Lampadusa and Senegal bear a universal problem and it blends into one common visual. But opinions on industrial fishing tell a less cohesive story and this documentary presents the argument through two divergent perspectives.

“We are fighting a war against fish,” scientist Daniel Pauly explains. Though he is pro- sustainable fishing, he identifies man’s increasing power within the fishing industry—technological nautical advancement, increasing consumer demand, influential policy-making and greedy corporate control—to explain why humans are unwilling to restrain themselves from destroying fish

populations. “Fisherman cheat because they can. Fisherman cheat because they won’t get caught. That’s true of all systems,” says Charles Clover, on whose book this movie is based. On a phone call with the manager at Nobu London, Clover asks why the restaurant refuses to take bluefin tuna off the menu. The manager avoids the obvious answer: because it is popular, fish are fashionable and consumers will buy it. Instead, he offers a guarantee that the menu will warn customers about endangered fish by putting an asterisks and a note beside any fish that qualifies. We know that bluefin tuna are in crisis, yet corporations large and small care little about preserving the population.

The largest purchaser of bluefin tuna is Mitsubishi. Estimates by one tuna researcher claim that the multinational corporation now controls about 60% of the total production of Northern bluefin tuna in the Atlantic and Mediterranean through its freezing and transportation capacities. Each year scientists calculate in tons the numbers needed to regulate and rebuild tuna populations. They then recommend their findings to an EU fishing ministry. To maintain the Atlantic bluefin tuna population, fisherman would have to reduce their yearly catch to 15,000 tons. To see the population rejuvenate, the catch limit would have to be 10,000 tons. Knowing this information, EU ministers have voted for a cap of 29,500 tons—and in real numbers, Atlantic bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean are actually fished to unregulated capacities of 61,000 tons per year, about 1/3 of the total bluefin population. When governments simply refuse responsibility for stricter regulations, fishery commissions can ignore scientific truths. But the race against fish, controlled by human competition, is also influenced by denial—a fisherman in Senegal speaks straight into the camera to claim “the sea has betrayed us.”

Still, there is optimism in the End of the Line. Understanding the resistance they are up against, scientists regulating fish extinction believe that there is hope in unveiling real numbers, actual species disappearances and major changes to our ecosystem. Public knowledge enhances transparency. Because fish populations are collapsing at calculable, consistent rates, scientists aver with confidence that if changes are not made to the fishing industry, most fish we eat today will disappear by 2048.

End of the Line is an educational tool and a call to arms. Murray imparts three written commandments to his viewers as the film ends: consumers, politicians and advocates must enact change. We must be curious eaters, asking questions about where our fish comes from and whether it is sustainably produced. Helping us on this front, Clover has launched a new site called [Fish2Fork](#), which features sustainability grades for restaurants that serve fish all over the world — and you can add reviews. In addition, politicians need to value science and take control of fishing regulations and fisherman must be forced to observe the rules. Advocates for a sustainable fishing movement must work for the creation of more ocean reserves like the one filmed in the Exuma Cays of the Bahamas. Here, endangered and collapsing fish species swim freely in an area protected by no-fishing laws. 1% of our ocean is currently protected from commercial fishing; the remaining 99% is an illusion of abundance.

When industrial fish farming began in 1952, the number of boats trolling for catch was not anywhere near today’s fleet. One and a half billion fishing hooks a year are attached to lines so long, they could wrap around the world 550 times over. One-tenth of the world’s entire catch captured using long line and trawling methods is thrown back overboard. Seven million tons of sea creatures ranging from turtles to dolphins to sea birds are not even brought to market. As we “win” the fight against fish by exploiting the ocean’s exhaustible resources, Murray challenges us to ask what we have to gain by doing so.

You can see the film at a [screening](#) near you. Meanwhile, here is the trailer:

