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## **Fish As Food: A Love Affair, Issues Included**

What's Your Reaction?

Imagine the evolution of a relationship, when the delight in discovering a new lover is followed by the discovery of his or her issues, which eventually leads to the relationship being reassessed, however painful this might be.

I speak here about seafood, discovered by many only in the last few years. It's a fresh new food that widely expanded the choices previously available. It is tasty yet light, and widely known as good for one's heart and brain.

But then, the novelty of seafood gradually decreased as it turned out to have health issues, legal issues and ethical issues.

You may have read about the health issues, which are quickly summarized here: while the benefits of fish-derived omega-3s, widely touted as good for the heart, are dubious and in many cases not markedly superior to those of nuts, flax seeds or leafy greens, the role of fish as a source of mercury, dioxin and other pollutants is well established, and can reach very high levels of concentration in some species, notably tuna and farmed salmon.

A friend might tell you about the legal issue: many fish are caught illegally, or above quota, which can both contribute to overfishing. Another might tell you that the fish you eat in restaurants are frequently misidentified. In other words, you do not know where they are from, and indeed, what they are.

Then there are the ethical issues, some diffuse and easily ignored, others insistent and increasingly affecting the relationship.

The fish sold in big developed nations' markets such as the US, Europe and Japan are mostly imported, since these countries having long overfished their coastal resources. In fact, fish is a totally globalized commodity, consumed the most on continents other than where they were caught.

And it is mainly from the waters of developing countries - many with rampant malnutrition - that most of the imports for the markets of developed nations originate. Given that the world catch of wild fish is declining (it is!), this means that the increased consumption of fish in rich countries leads to less fish being available to supply local markets in poorer countries.

No problem, we are told. We are going to farm the fish we need. But there is a hitch: salmon and many other farmed fish are carnivorous, and farming them involves feeding them with animal flesh, just as farming mountain lions would. In this case, the animal flesh, supplied in the form of pellets, consists of ground up sardines, anchovies, mackerels and other edible fish caught mainly - you guessed it - in developing countries. About 3-4 pounds of ground up small fishes are required to produce one pound of farmed salmon. Thus, the more farmed fish we produce, the less fish there is. This is akin to robbing Pedro to pay Paul.

And mind you, this doesn't even begin to address the issue that the small fish we remove from the sea to feed farmed salmon, pigs and chickens (fish-eating chicken!), would have been the prey of beloved animals, like majestic seabirds and frolicking dolphins. Indeed, in the Mediterranean, where tuna 'farming' is now widely practiced, the removal of small

fish for tuna fattening has been so extensive that the 'common dolphin' is becoming rare, with individual dolphins showing protruding ribcages like the mangy dogs one would see at the edge of Sahelian towns.

These are real issues, capable of inducing concern and guilt in at least five percent of the population. To assuage these, we have devised various rituals, of which wallet cards are the most visible. These are small folding cards, with different animated fish on them that are green when the fish are 'good to eat', yellow when they are 'to be eaten with caution' (with lips pursed?) and red when the fish are 'not to be eaten'. The corresponding emotions end up being: feeling smug, slightly risqué or really naughty. However, whether these cards and similar consumer-oriented initiatives ever achieve their stated goal of decreasing overfishing has rarely, if ever, been evaluated.

In other words, what initially began as a consciousness-raising tool risks ending up as a feel-good device, similar to Papal indulgences - though the latter at least financed the St. Peter's Basilica and the painting by Michelangelo that adorns it.

What was this elevated consciousness going to be good for, anyway? If it was to demand new ocean policies that protect marine ecosystems, and all the amazing life they contain, why can't we do this directly, as active and concerned citizens? Why does it have to be connected with eating? Let us not forget that it is our monstrous appetite which is one of the key reasons why we can't live sustainably on this planet.

These issues, and many more, make it necessary to reassess our love affair with fish. We need to seriously ask why the morality of advocating for increased fish consumption in developed countries is not as questionable as driving a Hummer or wearing a tiger skin coat. Now, the latter is not any more a matter of judgment (or lack thereof), but a legal matter; it is illegal, completely verboten, to trade in tiger products. So why do we continue to believe that tut-tutting about the consumption of illegally caught, or mislabeled fish, is going to deter the pirates who caught them?

What we need is a broader ethic that extends to the ocean and the wildlife it contains, currently known as 'seafood'. Affording some of that wildlife a refuge from fishing would be a good start. Currently, less than 1 percent of the ocean is closed to fishing as compared to the 12 percent of land that is protected.

The point, you see, is that if we want to maintain this relationship with seafood, we must help it with its issues. In other word, as with any relationship, we must care.

Postscript:

There are a multitude of websites touching on the above material.

For access to a whole lots of seafood wallet guides, see [www.seafoodguide.org](http://www.seafoodguide.org);

For dealing with the more serious issue of putting pressure on retailers, see [www.greenpeace.org/usa/campaigns/oceans/seafood](http://www.greenpeace.org/usa/campaigns/oceans/seafood)

For a challenging blog on seafood consumption, guilt and marine conservation issues see Guilty Planet, by Jennifer Jacquet.

## **Books By Dr. Daniel Pauly**