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The End of the Line - PART TWO

13 Oct 09 - Charles Clover - Slowweek

My journey round the world's fisheries to write this book was a journey from innocence to experience. By and large, it was rather depressing with one or two vital and uplifting exceptions, with the fishermen that I had met and the conservationists that had finally got it right. I began in Lowestoft, not far from where I live.



Lowestoft is a flatfish port. They land sole there, or they used to. Once the Dover sole on your plate in London's finest hotels would have come by night on a train from Lowestoft. Now the deepwater fleet in Lowestoft has gone bust, and the biggest employer is the fisheries laboratory that was meant to ensure that there was plenty of fish to catch.

I went to the port of Bonavista in Newfoundland, where the cod population on the grand banks has collapsed and where catching a single cod now attracts a fine of \$500—that's on rod and line.

I recently went to Spain to see the so-called 'tuna farms', in which the last wild bluefin tuna of the Mediterranean are being rounded up by purse seiners and spatter aircraft before air freighted and sent to Japan. There are farms like that in Italy, too. They have all been awarded 'aquaculture grants' by the EU, though they are not strictly aquaculture at all, for the fish in these farms do not breathe.

I went to see the 'amazing' almadrabas, tuna hunts, with the traditional fixed nets in the Straits of Gibraltar in which the bluefin have been caught since Phoenician times. I stood covered in saltwater and blood, watching 250-kilo tunas being hooked into a barge by three men with great big hand gaffs. 5,000 bluefin tuna were caught in the almadraba in 1999.

It was pretty much the same figure for decades before that. 2,000 were caught in 2000; 900 were caught last year. This is a way of life that has gone on for 3,000 years, which I would say is almost definitive of human civilization, which is going to be out of business in a very short time because of tuna farming. The bluefin of the Mediterranean and the Eastern Atlantic is on its way out, the result of a feeding frenzy of greed.

I also went to port of Dakar, Senegal, where one of the world's most productive ecosystems is being mined by subsidized European fleets to the detriment of the indigenous population who have very little else but fish to live on.

I researched the kind of tuna that goes into sandwiches: tropical tunas. I was assured by supermarkets that these tunas were caught by methods that were dolphin-friendly. This is a curious piece of information, because, in most oceans of the world, with the exception of the Eastern Pacific, dolphins do not run with tunas.

What does run with tunas, or what gets caught in the tuna purse seine nets that catch the tuna that goes in your sandwiches, are: whales, including the most endangered of the species; the most endangered turtles or five species of them; manta rays; great white sharks; and loads of other species that reproduce extremely slowly and which cannot take this fishing pressure. Fishermen catching the tuna for your sandwich kill the entire cast list of *Finding Nemo*. Hardly anybody seems to know about this.

Fish farming would be a solution to many of these problems but for one thing. Raising carnivorous fish such as salmon and bass requires oil and meal from small wild-caught fish such as blue whiting, which is now being caught in enormous and unsustainable quantities by Iceland, Norway and the EU, who cannot agree on a quota and therefore catch 2.5 million tons of it every year, instead of the sustainable catch of 600,000 tons. There is still a lot of blue whiting left, but the population declined by 25% last year. How long that can go on, I'm not sure. This year the sand eel fisheries in the North Sea collapsed. The EU is not used to curtailing fisheries very often, and it banned fishing for sand eels for the first time this year.

What we see everywhere in the world's oceans is the decline of once great natural resources. We see that our technological ability to exploit the resources of the sea has far outstripped our ability to manage them. Fashion and health advice are compounding an ancient tradition of mining out the sea and moving on. Yet some people haven't got it yet. Some chefs are still serving endangered fish. What would we say if they included pandas or rhinos on the menu? We are at last realizing that over-fishing is one of the world's greatest problems. Perhaps second only to global warming in the environmental area.

The knowledge that the world's fish stocks are in decline - that it's not just a localized problem, that it's not just a few fish off the coast of Britain or off the US - is actually enormously new. It's a realization that came with one paper in *Nature* in 2003 by Dan Pauly of the University of British Columbia, and in *Science*. Pauly analyzed the UN Food and Agriculture Administration's figures, because they continued to go up. It surprised him that catches of wild fish continued to go up like that.

Somewhere, despite the collapse of all the cod in Newfoundland, somebody was finding some more fish to catch, and it rather surprised him. Then he found that what it actually represented was lying by the Chinese, because the Chinese, in order to get promoted in the Communist system, have to have figures that go up. All the Chinese bureaucrats were declaring increased catches year after year, and that was the only thing that was putting up the world's fish catches every year. In fact, when you took that out, the world's catches of wild fish have been declining since the late 1980s.

I believe that paper was the marine equivalent of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*, the book that started the environmental movement, some people would say, and that was about the damage that intensive farming was doing to the countryside.

It has taken 42 years and a succession of food scares for farmers to begin talking about traceability, rare breeds, sustainability and for organic food to become a mainstream product. In Britain the organic market is now well over a billion pounds a year and rising steeply. So, some things do get better. Some of us journalists have spent four decades, in my case three decades, giving farmers a hard time for what they were doing to our food and to our wildlife, and they are now, in fact, doing something about it.

Now it's intensive fishing's turn. Fishermen are the new farmers. They—or some of them, the technological ones, at least—stand revealed as the biggest and most indiscriminate killers of wildlife on the planet. That is not a challengeable statement. There is the last industry on earth, with a few honorable exceptions, that doesn't think about the environmental impact of what it is doing. I think that will change, particularly if we consumers exercise our consciences by buying sustainably caught fish. And there is some.

And if we ask waiters and restaurateurs for more information on where that fish comes from and how it was caught, and if we become a little bit more knowledgeable about it. Curiously, some of the fish that is best for us is also sustainable. I had some for lunch. Sardines have enormous quantities of Omega 3, which is what everybody wants and is supposed to have for their lung, brain and heart functions. And they are a fast reproducing fish, like the herring or mackerel in our waters around Britain. I would recommend that anyone eat those fish.

Although I may not sound it, I am optimistic that fishing and fishermen will listen, because solving the problems of over-fishing is not as difficult as solving some of the more global, environmental problems we're faced with. There are beacons of good practice in every ocean. In Iceland and New Zealand, cod and other stocks have been managed pretty well. In parts of the Pacific coast of the United States there are some extremely good examples. There are wonderful examples in the Eastern US and New Zealand that the plenty can come back with marine reserves.

We know by and large what must be done, and we know it can be done regionally or locally given the political will. I just hope that it doesn't take 42 years after Dan Pauly's paper showing that wild fish catches are on decline for sustainably caught wild fish to become the quality standard as organic food has begun to be on land.

Adapted from a speech made at the Slow Fish event in Genoa, 2005.

Charles Clover, UK, has been the Environment Editor of *The Daily Telegraph*, since 1987. He is a frequent contributor to BBC TV, Sky and BBC Radio news. His book, *The End of the Line* (2006), which argues that our passion for fish is unsustainable, has inspired an award-winning documentary film.

The End of the Line
How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat
by Charles Clover
Hardcover: Nov 2006,
384 pages.
Paperback: Mar 2008,
396 pages.

- ▶ News archive from Terramadre
- ▶ News archive from Slowfood Foundation for Biodiversity

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