



## BUSINESSDAY

### South Africa: Pricking Our Conscience About Fishy Food Choices

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Johannesburg — IT WAS the biggest salmon he'd ever caught, but the pride British journalist Charles Clover felt in catching the 10kg fish from the Welsh River Dee has long since dissipated. There is no longer a spring run along the river, most likely because anglers have caught so many salmon that there are too few left to breed.

"The thought occurred to me: if you could overfish a river with rod and line, what were these guys with trawlers and long lines doing in the oceans?" says Clover. That idea in the 1980s prompted a series of investigations into the damage being wrought by our seemingly insatiable appetite for seafood and our misplaced belief that the oceans are inexhaustible.

"I wrote a huge piece in 1991, before the collapse of the cod stocks in Newfoundland, saying aren't all the world's fisheries going down? This was 11 years before (marine scientist) Daniel Pauly proved that they were," says Clover, arguing that journalists should always act on what they observe.

"I was right. It just proves the purpose of journalism at a time when the world has forgotten it and all our institutions are going bust and no one can work out how to pay journalists to investigate things," he says, at a function hosted by financial services group Investec, which with Pick n Pay has co-sponsored the South African launch of *The End of the Line*, a documentary based on his award-winning book of the same title. Pick n Pay already endorses the World Wide Fund for Nature's sustainable seafood initiative, a consumer guide to endangered fish species.

Clover, who was a Telegraph reporter for 25 years and now writes a weekly column for London's Sunday Times, was recently in SA to promote the film, which is due for release here on October 22. It is a beautifully shot campaign against our heedless over exploitation of the world's oceans, with a simple and chilling message: if we don't change the way we eat, there will be no more fish by mid-century. Instead of kabeljou and prawns, we'll be facing plates of jellyfish and worms.

Human beings have always exploited the ocean, but the serious damage really kicked in with the advent of industrialised fishing in the 1950s. Our ability to develop increasingly sophisticated technology meant wild fish didn't stand a chance.

*The End of the Line* skillfully interweaves scientific evidence with the human tragedies left in the wake of overfishing. Data collected by scientists show species after species of fish has collapsed and we are pushing the oceans to the point of no return.

Unlike the debate over the role human activity is playing in climate change, this field is much less polarised. No one doubts the fish stocks are declining - the issue here is how rapidly it is happening, and the extent to which responsible fishing can hold back the tide, says Clover.

The film's warning tales include that of the collapse of the North Sea cod stocks off the coast of Newfoundland, which destroyed the livelihood of an entire community virtually overnight, and the terrible choice confronting an impoverished Senegalese fisherman, who must decide between continuing to eke out a living from waters denuded of fish by supertrawlers or face the daunting prospect of emigrating to Europe in the hope of a better life for his family.

The film includes arresting images of the startling beauty that inhabits the oceans, contrasted against the greed and destruction of modern-day fishing. Bottom trawlers quite literally destroy everything in their path, cutting a swathe through ocean life. It also explores the vested interests at play, showing how European politicians ignore scientific evidence to set tuna quotas way above the catch limits recommended by scientists, and how the fishing industry simply ignores the quotas because it knows they will not be enforced.

It is a documentary that imparts sadness and anger but, unlike many conservation campaigns, it is not all doom and gloom. It certainly has the power to make one feel guilty about making ignorant choices in a restaurant or at the supermarket, but it also leaves viewers with a sense of hope arising from the power wielded by consumers. Wiser choices in eating establishments or at the fish counter can lead to significant changes, maintains the team behind the film.

"I'm a fisherman. I catch fish, I eat fish. But now I'm extremely (careful) about which fish I eat. I think that sends a message to the market that we'd like to eat fish that's been fished responsibly," says Clover. To illustrate the point, he describes how retailer surveys by Greenpeace and the Marine Stewardship Council, combined with growing consumer awareness of the dangers of our love of fish, prompted leading UK supermarket chains to radically alter their product mix.

"Within a year, there was a revolution. It was really quite remarkable. When you start naming and shaming retailers, (who) are enormously sensitive to their reputation, stuff happens," says

Clover. Many fish that were being caught irresponsibly "simply vanished off the shelf".

The film itself also had a direct effect: UK retailers Waitrose and Marks & Spencer have stopped selling endangered swordfish, skate and bluefin tuna, international deli chain Pret a Manger has removed bluefin tuna from its sandwiches and sushi, and celebrity chef Jamie Oliver has pledged to remove the fish from his recipes.

However, Clover quickly realised that up to half the fish eaten in the UK was bypassing retailers. It was going to fast-food outlets and restaurants, which continued to sell endangered species.

That prompted the team behind the film to launch the Fish2fork campaign, which exposes chefs and restaurants selling fish that should ideally be avoided. It has prompted many of the UK's top restaurants to remove endangered species from their menus.

That is all well and good, but what about the multinational fishing companies intent on delivering ever-growing returns to shareholders? What does Clover say to convince them to stop catching and selling such lucrative products, or at least persuade them to spend more money on doing it in a less irresponsible way?

"Do you want to go on employing all those people or not?" he says. "Because if you go on overfishing, you won't."

Clover maintains it is actually not the big companies that are at fault. "It's such a big problem that is within the planning horizons of CEOs of major international companies. There really is a danger that you will not have these resources in 10 years' time. It's not within the five-year election time frame, but it is within the CEO time frame. This is why we are seeing such inspiring behaviour by Unilever, which in the 1990s set up the Marine Stewardship Council."

The council encourages sustainable fishing and endorses "safe" fish and seafood products with a blue eco-label.

Clover believes South African consumers have the power to wield influence at two levels, much as those in the UK have done. We need to ask more questions about how and where the fish we buy has been caught, and pressure our politicians to use the scientific evidence to make more environmentally sound decisions within international bodies such as the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), he says.

"Institutions like ICCAT are incredibly dysfunctional and corrupt. They are destroying resources that are the birthright of us all and just won't be around in a few years' time.

"Politically, I have a big plea to SA to be the big player in the fisheries world, and be on the right side for a change on some of the critical battles that are coming up, notably about tuna and sharks.

"SA has an incredibly powerful voice because it is on two oceans, both of which have tuna commissions that are defective. It is the voice that needs to be heard."

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