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Pocket Guides Aim for Better Deal for Sea Fish

By: [Frank Nelson](#) | March 12, 2010 | 14:00 PM (PDT) | [Print](#)

Bottom-up campaigns to educate seafood lovers and sellers about what species are in trouble haven't turned the tide yet, but there's still hope they'll help.

As the heavyweights of conserving wildlife [gather](#) to advise the globe on issues like saving the tasty bluefin tuna, one unlikely weapon in the fight to manage, and thus save, the world's vanishing wild fish is a lightweight card that slides into the purse or wallet of anyone who eats.

California's [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#) has been regularly updating and printing these pocket guides to sustainable seafood for the past decade, giving away an estimated 33 million so far.

Ken Peterson, the aquarium's communications director, says copies of Seafood Watch can also be downloaded from the Web site and, for the past year, the information has been accessible as an iPhone app.

Similar consumer campaigns are running elsewhere around the country: for example, the Right Bite program at Chicago's [Shedd Aquarium](#), located on the shores of Lake Michigan.

"I think the cards are a great start to learning more about sustainable seafood and how the choices we make can have an impact," says Kassia Perpich, coordinator of the Shedd's program. "They encourage people to speak up and ask questions."

According to the Food and Aquaculture Organization of the [United Nations](#), the worldwide appetite for seafood is continuing to grow, with China, Japan and the United States leading consumption. Americans eat on average around 16 pounds of seafood each per year.

Stoked by escalating global demand, industrial-scale fishing fleets, using state-of-the-art technology to locate their catch, are rapidly thinning the world's remaining stocks of wild fish. In the process, additional concerns have been raised about the collateral damage to species caught up in nets and habitat destruction along the ocean floor.

Fish farming is expanding to help satisfy demand but this often creates its own environmental problems. In particular, aquaculture has drawn fire for the amount of small, wild-caught species being ground into meal to feed larger, farmed fish.

"By making environmentally responsible buying decisions, we can support species that are abundant and from well-managed fisheries, while giving those that aren't a chance to recover," says the Shedd's conservation programs manager, Michell Jost.

But does it really work that way? Do the decisions of individual shoppers in Chicago or diners in Denver translate into effective sanctions against unsustainable fishing practices on the other side of the world? That's a critical question given that, as Peterson says, about 80 percent of the seafood Americans eat comes from overseas.

Some researchers, concerned at the lack of any hard evidence, remain skeptical about the effectiveness of consumer campaigns and suggest other steps, such as eliminating huge government fishing subsidies, might bring better results.

“The number of consumers reached by a seafood choice campaign is not a measure of success unless it is accompanied by a measurable improvement in wild fish populations,” said a report compiled by nine researchers and published January in [Oryx, the International Journal of Conservation](#).

“Simply creating demand for an eco-certified product is not enough unless there is a concurrent decrease in demand for other overfished species,” reads the report.

Its lead author is Jennifer Jacquet, who also pens [The Guilty Planet blog](#) and is a postdoctoral research fellow in the [Fisheries Center](#) at the University of British Columbia.

In a 2007 [report](#), she and [Daniel Pauly](#), a professor at the Fisheries Center, concluded: “Consumers should not be misled that a system of management or conservation based on purchasing power alone will adequately address the present dilemma facing fisheries globally.”

Bottom line, says Jacquet, is that after more than a decade of market-based sustainable seafood initiatives, demand for wild fish is higher than ever and populations are still declining.

Carl Safina, president of the [Blue Ocean Institute](#), originated the seafood wallet cards in 1998 as part of the Audubon Society's Living Oceans program, which he had founded five years earlier.

Blue Ocean, based on New York's Long Island, still issues the guides with additional rankings for more than 100 types of seafood accessible via an automated FishPhone service.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium, an early campaigner on behalf of sustainable seafood, was quick to adopt Safina's idea, creating pocket guides to help consumers make the right choices as they trawled the fish section of their local store or opened a menu.

Helpfully color-coded like traffic lights — green for go (“Best choices”), yellow for caution (“Good alternatives”) and red for stop (“Avoid”) — the guides encourage shoppers and diners to be informed about where the fish comes from and how it was caught or farmed.

“Backed by a team of fisheries and aquaculture researchers, Seafood Watch has become a recognizable standard and reference point for millions of conservation-minded consumers and restaurateurs in the United States,” says Julie Packard, Monterey's executive director, in last October's report [“Turning the Tide: The State of Seafood”](#).

“Now more than ever, consumers are asking for seafood that is both good for their health, and the health of the oceans,” she adds.

However, Jacquet and her fellow researchers have criticized inconsistencies between the various consumer guides, saying they deliver mixed messages about what and what not to eat, which only confuses the public. (University of Rhode Island researchers have done a study comparing various seafood [guides](#).)

They also argue that the complex issues behind sustainable seafood cannot easily be reduced to a wallet card. They see the guides as too blunt, capable of penalizing good operators along with the bad.

However, Kate McLaughlin, Blue Ocean's seafood program director, defends the differences between some of the guides. "We'd be doing a disservice to the consumer if we glossed over that complexity," she says. "It's all about learning more about your food source."

While the influence of consumers alone may be open to question, many believe such campaigns are a vital first step, seeding the idea of change and influencing those higher up the decision-making chain, such as restaurant chefs and wholesale seafood buyers.

Jacquet says the largest 10 food retailers account for almost half the U.S. seafood market while in the United Kingdom, almost 90 percent of seafood is sold through supermarkets, which "have gained immense buying power."

Greenpeace now ranks the performance of supermarkets in eight European [countries](#). The strategy has prompted fierce competition among major retailers to improve sustainable seafood policies and thus advance their standing in the published ratings.

Peterson sees similar trends starting to show up here. "When people pull out the (Seafood Watch) guide and start asking questions, when that happens enough times, savvy business people realize they have to educate themselves and deal with it."

He reels off the names of major retailers like Wal-Mart, Target, Safeway, Whole Foods and Trader Joe's that have made public commitments to buying sustainably caught or farmed seafood.

Such retailers, food service companies and restaurants are moving in the same direction and he attributes this largely to the influence of individuals. "Where consumers have the voice and the passion, this is what happens."

Consumer campaigns have certainly served to sharpen the focus on chefs and restaurants. For example, Blue Ocean now runs online courses to educate chefs, trainee chefs, wait staff and restaurant managers about sustainable [seafood](#).

Similarly, Chicago's Shedd aims to educate chefs, caterers and others in the culinary industry. "This is a food-loving town," says Perpich, referencing cooking demonstrations, lectures and sushi classes in which Alaskan salmon substitutes for endangered bluefin and yellowfin tuna.

(About 80 percent of bluefin tuna goes to Japan where the fish are prized by sushi and sashimi lovers, and can fetch upwards of \$100,000 each. But drastic overfishing has now sparked demand for a trade ban, which will be put to a vote at the [Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species](#) meeting now taking place in Qatar.)

[Fish2Fork](#), a United Kingdom-based online restaurant review site that launched in the United States in January, has taken things a step further, rating eateries on how responsibly they source their seafood. Ratings range from five plump blue fish — "best in class" — to five skeletal red fish, or "a complete disregard for our planet and its fish stocks."

The Monterey and Chicago aquariums are among many prominent marine-related groups and institutions seeking to harness the combined power of public opinion and the consumer dollar in the fight to save endangered fisheries.

More than a dozen such organizations have formed the [Conservation Alliance for Seafood Solutions](#), which aims to address fisheries management and conservation issues by working with seafood-related businesses and policymakers.

But for consumers still unsure about their most effective way to influence worldwide fishing practices, the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) is making things easier with its comprehensive certification and eco-labeling

program.

MSC's distinctive blue-and-white oval labels, already familiar in supermarkets, shops and restaurants across Europe, are now taking root in the United States, offering consumers independent assurance and verification that they are buying sustainable seafood.

“Certification is the gold standard,” says Kerry Coughlin, MSC's director for the Americas, based in Seattle. She says the reputation of the international organization, founded a decade ago and headquartered in London, hinges on the “credibility of its eco-label,” now found in more than 60 countries.

Coughlin says many fisheries appreciate the need to protect the ocean's natural resources while major seafood suppliers and retailers — spurred on by consumer demand — have also come to recognize that good environmental stewardship equals good business.

In 2006, for example, Wal-Mart committed to buying only MSC-certified fresh and frozen fish by 2011, and Coughlin believes the retail giant will be “very close” to achieving that goal.

More recently, Sodexo made a similar pledge. The food services and facilities management company, which serves 10 million people every day at 6,000 schools, hospitals, military bases and other locations, will use only MSC-certified wild-caught seafood by 2015.

MSC has so far certified 63 fisheries with a combined catch of almost 4 million tons. Another 131 fisheries around the world are going through the assessment process and, if approved, would boost the total certified catch to almost 7 million tons, or more than 12 percent of the global catch.

So, while there's still a long way to go, MSC certification offers the prospect of a solution for environmentally conscious consumers, for future generations of fishermen and for the survival of the world's wild fish.

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