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Film Exposes Overfishing Practices, Fishes for Answers



By [Mary Catherine O'Connor](#) | March 4th, 2010 [Comments](#)

I've a fear of oceans. Lakes—even the biggest ones—I don't mind. I love them, in fact, having grown up in Chicago and attending college on the shores of Lake Superior. But oceans, and their rip tides and undertows, have always struck me as sinister.

Ironically, just after returning from a week on a beach in Baja, where I started coming to terms with these fears, I watched *The End of the Line*, a newly released documentary that makes the case for why the oceans should be afraid of us.

The film, which Ted Danson narrates and Robert Murray directed, delves into the depravity we've brought to the world's oceans through centuries of wanton fishing (and, obviously, consuming) fish from oceans around the world.

The film starts in Newfoundland, whose fishermen nearly fished Northern cod to extinction before the Canadian government placed a two-year moratorium on the fishery in 1992, when the once seemingly endless bounty of cod started to deteriorate. As a result, 40,000 fishermen lost their jobs. And, though the moratorium was extended, cod stock never recovered.

"The cod is gone, and I think within the context of cod—particularly in the Canadian perspective—is that this is a species that has been fished for centuries and centuries. Cod was the reason that people migrated from the UK, from Europe—Northern France particularly—to Canada. It was because of cod," says Jeffrey Hutchings, a biology professor at Dalhousie University, who is interviewed for the film. "The loss of the [cod] fish was basically akin to a loss of soul, and it still remains that 15 years later."

But the larger focus of the film is on the workings of modern fisheries around the world and how they follow shockingly unsustainable—and in some cases downright corrupt—practices, to this day.

Erroneous reporting

The film follows a team of fisheries biologists who, in 2001, started breaking down and analyzing global fisheries reports, which had been showing the impossible: that as local fish stocks around the world decreased, the numbers reportedly caught (which makeup the global markets) were still raising.

The UN's [Food and Agriculture Organization](#) asked professor Daniel Pauly from the University of British Columbia to investigate the discrepancy. He and his team found it in China, where reporting outpaced what fishermen could have possibly pulled from the water.

"When you looked at the actually biological productivity of the sea—what we know about it everywhere else—the Chinese figures could not be right. They were just made up by Communist officials who only got preferment if the graphs kept going up, and the graphs kept going up because they were making up the figures," says [Charles Clover](#), a British journalist on whose book, *The End of the Line: How Overfishing Is Changing the World and What We Eat*, the documentary is based.

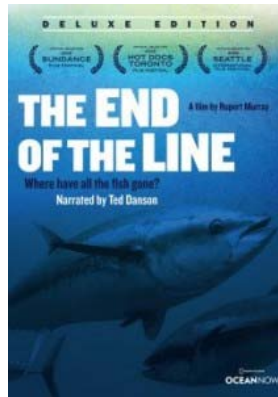
The film also follows a Robert Mielgo Bregazzi, a one-time Bluefin fisherman turned whistleblower and his attempts at uncovering the culprits behind the over-fishing and under-reporting of Bluefin Tuna. "Bluefin is the front line," says Clover. "Bluefin is the most immediate crisis we know about."

There are some international regulatory efforts to curb Bluefin catches, but the limits they impose are so anemic, they can't possibly stem the decline in stock, say experts.

And then there's the sheer wastefulness of so-called modern fishing practices, which, according to the film, return 7 million tons of dead fish to the sea because these fish were not the intended catch. That's a tenth of the world catch.

Some rays of hope

The antidote to over-fishing, the film makes clear, is in the hands of consumers of fish. They are the ones who control, through their demands, what is caught and sold in stores and served in restaurants. Clover has had some luck in pushing restaurateurs who serve endangered fish to remove the dishes from their menus or at least alert customers to the species' endangered status.



Alaska is on the front lines of the battle to conserve fish stocks, the film notes, and the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration strictly enforces regulations there, which are aimed at balancing the number of fishing boats and the duration of the fishing season with the available stock, in order to sustain populations.

And Walmart sells some wild-caught fresh and frozen fish that is certified by the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) and has pledged to sell only MSC certified fish by 2011. It sells around 20 million pounds of fresh fish per year, so if it sticks to its MSC-only pledge, this could really have an impact.

Birds' Eye says it gets two-thirds of its fish from sustainable sources and McDonalds says more than 90 percent of its fish comes from a sustainable source, the film notes.

The End of the Line is worth your time and could help push the consequences of overfishing into a stronger position on the already-crowded global environmental agenda. *The Economist* called the film, "The inconvenient truth about the impact of overfishing on the world's oceans."

Still, I would have liked to hear more of the human side of the story—more about how the loss of cod changed Newfoundland, for example. Give it a watch and let us know what you think. It's available on [DVD](#) or through iTunes.

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Come to a screening of *The End of the Line* on Tuesday, March 9 at Saul's Restaurant and Deli in Berkeley. We'll have dinner specials featuring sustainable Whitebait, Albacore Tuna melt, Trout, Mackerel.

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 **Dee** 3 days ago

The most sustainable diet is one with no fish - or other animals. The vegan diet, especially one with lots of locally and organically grown fruits, vegetables, grains, and legumes, is the diet that can save this planet (and hundreds of millions of people from heart disease and cancer).

Another reason not to eat fish: fish absorb pollutants that have been dumped in the oceans and have drained into the oceans from polluted rivers and groundwater for years. As a result, many fish, particularly the carnivorous ones, have very high levels of toxins in their flesh.

I look forward to seeing this film. I hope it talks about some of the other victims of the fishing industry: the marine mammals who are considered competition and who fishermen therefore massacre with mindless viciousness. Consider the harp seal pups that Newfoundlanders (and Magdalen Islanders - from Quebec) beat to death and shoot for their fur. They constantly use the excuse that the seals are eating their cod. The same sort of thing happens in Namibia with the Cape fur seal pups.

I hope many people will watch and be enlightened by this film.

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