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critical mass

Holy Mackerel

Feb 20, 2008

Lent is the biggest fish-eating season of the year. And that's a problem.

By Jennifer Jacquet



If Jesus can turn two fish into enough to feed five thousand people, now would be a good time to intervene. According to researchers, each American ate nearly a half-pound more seafood last year than the year before. As we reach the end of the Christian season of Lent—the period in which seafood consumption is at its highest—scientists predict that if the trend continues, wild marine fisheries will disappear in the next forty years.

Despite numerous studies demonstrating the negative impact of overfishing on marine biodiversity, global demand for seafood continues to grow. Conservationists advocate raising awareness as one solution to the fisheries crisis, but curbing demand for seafood may take a miracle.

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Or maybe the human appetite simply needs some assistance from religious leaders—particularly the pope.

Religion transformed seafood consumption when the Roman Catholic Church began promulgating the notion that fish is not meat. Fish not meat? "That's simply baloney," responded Carl Safina, scientist, writer, and co-founder of the Blue Ocean Institute, which hopes to inspire a new ethical consideration of the oceans.

In the eleventh century, the Catholic Church banned meat but sanctioned fish as a show of penance on Fridays and during the forty days before Easter. When other observances with similar restrictions were added to the equation, the prohibition meant more than one hundred fish-only days per year.

For the past one thousand years, fishing boats have scoured the oceans in part to feed throngs for whom eating is an act of faith. Nearly one-quarter of all Americans are Roman Catholic, and this has translated to a sizeable demand. In 1939, sixty-nine percent of seafood in New York City was sold on Fridays. In 1962, a McDonald's in Cincinnati, Ohio nearly went bankrupt due to its eighty-seven percent Catholic clientele. With weekend receipts decimated by meatless Fridays, owner Lou Groen invented the fish sandwich that saved his franchise.

The Filet-O-Fish spread to other McDonald's across the country and is now, owing to one neighborhood's Catholic population, a permanent fixture on the McDonald's menu. In 1966, Pope Paul VI ended the Friday ban on meat, except during Lent. However, Friday Fish Fries are still so common during the penitential season that the forty days before Easter are a godsend for fish sales. Wendy's fast food chain now sells fish sandwiches before Easter as well, and recently, KFC launched its own Lent-only fish products in an attempt to reel in the Catholic market. The United States now eats almost five times more fish than it did one hundred years ago.

"Fish live their lives mainly hidden," Safina said. "By the time we see them they're dead. It would be like people's perception of birds being limited to the poultry section of the supermarket."

The issue of overfishing is plainly one of over-consumption — consumption that has been fueled by religious rules. But Pope Benedict XVI has expressed the Catholic Church's need to protect Creation and, last year, dedicated a day (September 1st) as an annual tribute. Many Protestant denominations also emphasize the need for stewardship. Environmentalists want religious leaders to practice what they preach and become stewards of fish rather than advocates of their consumption.

A change of stance on Lenten seafood would not be the first time Christian leaders went green. Last year, the Vatican installed solar panels, and later announced that Vatican City would become the world's first carbon-neutral state. The pope also issued a public warning that environmental degradation was further aggravating the heavy burden on the world's poor.

Recently, another religious group, the Evangelical Environmental Network, initiated a "What Would Jesus Drive?" campaign because, according to their slogan, "transportation is a moral issue."

This Easter, religious leaders might likewise consider fisheries a moral issue. Who will be the first to ask, "What Would Jesus Fish?"

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