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Columns

What will we do when all the fish are gone?

Keeble McFarlane
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Visit any city in the world where a critical mass of Jamaicans have settled and you are sure to find a source of what many regard as our national dish - ackee and saltfish. Saltfish - or more accurately, salted cod - goes back to the early days of African settlement in these islands. The sugar, molasses and rum the slaves produced under the lash and the unrelenting sun were loaded onto ships which had come from British ports bearing goods manufactured in the sweat-shops of England, Scotland and Wales, where the underclass lived in a kind of slavery of their own. Some of the sweet goodies went another way, northwards to Nova Scotia, New Brunswick and Newfoundland, to be swapped for salted cod and wood cut from the straight and tall pine, spruce and fir trees which grew profusely in those climes.

When the Europeans first invaded those northern territories, the waters teemed with cod which commonly grew as long as a man was tall or even bigger. Early settlers told of the sea being so populated by these creatures that a man could almost walk from the boat to shore on their backs. Sadly, that is no more, and the possibility is very remote that even the youngest among us will ever see the return of anything like it.

As the last century drew to a close, the men who left the hardscrabble outports of Newfoundland and Nova Scotia to search for cod in the traditional manner - paying out long lines loaded with hooks baited with small squid - saw the truth on a daily basis: the cod fishery was dying right before their eyes.

The culprit was modern practice and the voracious appetite of people on both sides of the Atlantic and as far away as Asia for the fruit of the sea. Fishing trawlers from Spain, Portugal, Russia, and even Japan and Korea joined the traditional fishers from eastern Canada and the northeastern United States. These were highly efficient factory operations towing huge arrays of nets called purse seines which could occupy as much space as a two-storey house. They dragged these giant contraptions along the sea bed, scooping up everything in the

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way, and disturbing the sea bottom where many species rest, spawn, feed or hide from predators.

Fish were caught much earlier in their life cycle, and therefore the population declined drastically as the fish left behind couldn't grow to their optimum size and reproduce accordingly. When things hit bottom, the Canadian government and the North Atlantic Fishery Organisation slapped severe restrictions on the cod fishery, hoping that it would eventually bounce back. Which explains why the price of cod has gone up so much in recent years, and why you find saltfish substitutes such as pollock from the unforgiving seas of the Bering Strait.

The same thing is happening all over the world, in all kinds of fisheries - the annual catch has expanded exponentially as more and more countries demand more fish on their plates. Fishers employ ruthless methods to secure their catches, and sadly, a large proportion of the fish they ensnare in their nets is thrown away as "by-catch".

Worse yet, these methods often take in dolphins, porpoises and other sea mammals, resulting in millions of them drowning and being discarded along with the rest of the by-catch. Then there is the criminal practice of those who catch sharks, cut off their fins and throw the creature back into the sea to die a slow, awful death from suffocation because they can no longer swim and pass water over their gills to extract oxygen. This is an egregious example of human vanity. The fins, which are essentially tasteless, are made into shark fin soup which is supposed to have aphrodisiac powers, and fetch frightful prices in Chinese restaurants all over the place.

Poorer fishermen in places like the Philippines, the Caribbean and Indonesia are known to use dynamite or cyanide to stun or kill fish on coral reefs, making them easier to catch. But it takes those little coral polyps thousands of years to build up a reef, which then becomes home to hundreds of other species. Cyanide poisons both the coral and the creatures which live on it, and blowing up a reef to catch a few fish is tantamount to cutting off your own nose and ears to buy dinner.

Fish, crabs, shrimp, lobsters and the other denizens of the oceans form an excellent source of protein as well as providing healthy supplements like omega-3 fats. But these creatures exist largely out of sight below the surface of the sea and even when we see them, do not elicit the same reaction from human beings as a cuddly panda or harp seal; the evocative frolics of a spirited zebra or odd-looking wildebeest.

A recent issue of my local morning paper carried a startling picture. Taken from a satellite, it showed 50 shrimp trawlers moving across the East China Sea off the mouth of the Yangtze River. Behind them, as plain as ever, were huge trails of mud churned up by the weighted nets ploughing up the ocean floor, looking for all the world like the furrows made by tractors harrowing farmers' fields. A fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia, Daniel Pauly, told the Toronto Globe and Mail that the trawlers are extremely destructive: "Basically, the implications are terrifying. Trawling is destroying bottom

habitat. these mud flats that are created are good for the production of shrimps only and nothing else."

A look at statistics from the UN and elsewhere show that in the past half-century, overfishing has wiped out perhaps ninety per cent of large fish such as tuna, sharks, swordfish and marlin, all of which prey on smaller species. No one is suggesting that we stop eating fish, but we have to treat the fishery with respect and go about harvesting and managing those stocks carefully and intelligently. Otherwise, our favourite fish dishes will exist only in our memories.

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