

Learn which fish to buy, eat for life

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At the fish counter of my local Wegmans, a sign reads, "There's something special about our fish, ask us why." Curiosity piqued, I obliged and learned the supermarket chain has taken steps to offer increasingly environment- and health-conscious shoppers farm-raised salmon choices that are more sustainably produced.

This is good news, considering the health, safety and environmental concerns leveled against farm-raised carnivorous fish, like salmon. Environmental problems associated with raising predatory fish in densely packed offshore net pens include pollution of water with uneaten food and a large volume of fecal material, along with the pesticides, antibiotics and other chemicals used to promote growth, combat parasitic infestation and control algae.

Depletion of fisheries is a major concern -- it takes 2 to 3 pounds of wild fish to produce 1 pound of farm-raised fish. Farmed fish that escape threaten wild stocks by competing for food and habitat, interbreeding and spreading pathogens.

Health concerns related to farmed fish, depending on their feed, include: a more than doubling of saturated fat levels and much-diminished omega-3 fatty acid content; higher levels of PCB contamination; and, a key issue for fish lovers, altered taste.

Fortunately, recent collaborations have started addressing these issues. Scientists from New York City-based organization Environmental Defense, in partnership with fish industry experts and representatives from Wegmans and Bon Appetit, a food service company, have developed a set of standards with the goal of reducing the salmon farming's toll on the environment, without substantially adding to the cost.

In "Catch of the Day," World Watch Institute senior researcher Brian Halweil lists the key provisions of these standards: "a low (1.5 or less) ratio of wild fish consumed to fish produced; no fish feed from at-risk or threatened species; no record of major salmon escapes at production facilities; no genetically modified fish; limited use of antibiotics and parasiticides; no use of hormones; and no raising of farmed salmon in migratory corridors of native salmon."

Creating such standards is vital. Fish-farming is growing dramatically: Since 1997, harvests have jumped more than 50 percent, from 36 million tons to 55 million tons. That's more than 40 percent of the global fish harvest.

More work is needed. Daniel Pauly, director of the Sea Around Us project at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, takes a critical view of aquaculture, which "offers to feed the world with farmed fish, while building more coastal feedlots wherein carnivores such as salmon and tuna are fed with other fish, the aquatic equivalent of robbing Peter to pay Paul."

FACTS: The problem is we humans have gotten too good at harvesting what was until quite recently a bounty in Earth's waters. But no more. According to the Marine Stewardship Council (<http://www.msc.org>), nearly three-quarters of the world's major stocks have been fished at or beyond their biological capacity. Many fish populations have been harvested so heavily, it will take years to recover; in some cases, they may never recover.

Thanks to an impressive harvesting arsenal including satellite positioning, seafloor-imaging systems and on-board processing, industrial fishers can now go farther and deeper than ever before. Fish may be free to roam the vast oceans, but there is no hiding place from today's ocean harvesters. Sadly, this harvest yields more than the desired crop. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization estimates that more than 7 million tons of what is caught annually worldwide is "by catch" (marine species with no market value) and is thrown overboard with next to no chance of survival.

Fish lovers have an essential role to play in rebuilding the health of the planet's fisheries. Look and ask for fish that meets criteria for health and sustainability.

The Marine Steward Council certifies fish with a Sustainable Fisheries label, based on the U.N. Food and Agriculture Organization's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. EcoFish, a U.S.-based company with its own "Seafood Safe" label, distributes sustainably caught fish to more than 1,000 grocery and natural food stores and more than 150 restaurants nationwide. The Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program recommends which seafood to buy or avoid, and how to become advocates for environmentally friendly seafood. Its handy pocket guide is available at <http://www.seafoodwatch.org>.

When dining out, ask about the seafood on the menu. Is it local? How was it caught? Is it sustainable?

Such concerns will move up to suppliers and others in the fishing industry -- and may go some way to help ensure the fish on the menu today will be there tomorrow.

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