



## The Oregonian

### EMPTY OCEANS

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This year's McCormick & Schmick's media tasting of its new salmon dishes was a dramatic display of the range of the Pacific's poster fish. Set out on the tables were sockeye tartare, smoked king salmon and grilled salmon with gnocchi, along with appetizers of salmon on skewers and in cakes. With the Willamette rolling by, the menu displayed the river-traveling red-fleshed fish that symbolizes the Northwest to the rest of the country.

Except, of course, that none of the fish was from around here.

The rivers that led to these platters ran through Alaska, as salmon fishing has been shut down along the West Coast.

One of the most storied food brands in American cuisine -- Columbia River Salmon -- now refers to fish that have been brought here to be sauteed.

They're not alone. You could say they're not the only fish in the sea, except that increasingly, there aren't that many fish in the sea.

And last week, when Oregon Gov. Ted Kulongoski joined California Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger and Washington Gov. Chris Gregoire to call for a new congressional look at the state of the seas, it was a reminder that this is a very bad time to be an ocean -- or to inhabit one.

Along with salmon, other big fish like tuna and shark are getting harder to find. Both giant European and Asian trawlers and Third World subsistence fishermen are going out longer and farther and returning with smaller and different catches. And hundreds of dead zones -- low-oxygen ocean areas where hardly anything lives -- now sprawl along the world's coastlines, including one that appears each summer off Oregon.

Most of the coverage of this year's worldwide food crisis -- which, from Beaverton to Bangladesh, is not too strong a term -- has stayed on land, except for the parts where the Mississippi turned the land to water. Exploding grain prices have changed all the calculations, and redrawn -- or erased -- menus across every continent.

But the buffet table at real risk of getting swept clean is the seafood section.

"Globally, we have lost a huge fraction of the large fish and the bottom fish," says Dr. Daniel Pauly, director of the Fisheries Centre at the University of British Columbia and world-wandering expert on vanishing fisheries. "This is the same actions playing the same way and always the same result -- we lose the fish. It is almost boring. You move the test to a new place, and you go on with your circus."

Along with this year's West Coast salmon shutdown, the Atlantic salmon is virtually gone, Atlantic cod is in very bad shape, the sushi mainstay tuna is having a hard time, and things aren't looking good for Peruvian anchovies.

Some experts predict oceans fished virtually empty by 2050.

To Pauly, the need is to cut back the catch while there's still a catch to regulate. He says there are examples, such as Pacific halibut, where regulation has stabilized the situation.

"We expect from the sea too much," he says. "Essentially, our imprint is too big on the planet. We must create marine protective areas, where we don't fish, where we don't discharge.

"The fisheries are an industry that must be kept from committing suicide."

And overfishing isn't even your only problem if you're a fish.

Or if you're an ocean.

We are now in the seventh consecutive year of large dead zones off the Oregon coast, stretches with oxygen levels too low to sustain marine life.

"This is historically unprecedented, as far as we know," says Jane Lubchenco, Valley Professor of Marine Biology and Distinguished Professor of Zoology at Oregon State. "Sometime between 2000 and 2002 there was a major shift in the system."

But if we're unique historically, we're far from alone geographically.

"There are 300 dead zones around the world," says Lubchenco. "In 1960, there were 10."

It's not easy being piscine.

Different dead zones have different causes of death. The huge one in the Gulf of Mexico is apparently caused by vast amounts of nitrogen washing down the Mississippi from the heavily fertilized farms of the Midwest. The zone off Oregon, according to Lubchenco and other experts, seems to have something to do with global warming; warmer water holds less oxygen, and the oceans in general are getting more acidic.

As for the future, Lubchenco says, "We need to plan for surprises. Nobody would have predicted dead zones off the coast 10 years ago. It would have been inconceivable."

Now, we have empty zones off the coast, empty nets out in the ocean and empty plates onshore. Not only are we crunching coastal economies, but at a time of rising global food pressures, the situation is eating away at a major world protein source.

The governors are right about needing a new ocean survey. We're also going to need a new ocean policy, broader than anything they've got in mind.

"It's not an insoluble problem," says Daniel Pauly, the Canadian fisheries expert. "It's a problem that has been treated as insoluble."

And unlike salmon, we can't just bring in a solution from Alaska.

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