

You can save fish stocks: Just eat the oily, smelly ones

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Vancouver Sun

Tuesday, November 04, 2008

The best way to stop the overfishing of endangered species might be for people to switch over to smelly, oily fish such as sardines, anchovies and herring, says a new study from the University of B.C.

Such fish, known as small pelagics, are still plentiful and are easy to catch because they travel in huge schools.

At the moment, about 30 million tonnes of small pelagics are taken from the world's oceans every year, making up about a third of all the fish caught worldwide.

The problem, according to the study, is that only a tiny fraction -- about one per cent -- end up as food on our dinner table.

More than 50 per cent are ground up and fed to farmed fish, such as salmon. Another 40 per cent are used as high-protein feed for chickens and pigs.

Jackie Alder, one of the study's authors, said it would be much more efficient -- and environmentally friendly -- for people to eat such fish directly rather than feeding them to other animals.

Increasing demand for such fish would also reduce the pressure on more endangered species, she said.

The challenge is convincing the public that small pelagics are an attractive alternative.

Such fish are popular in certain regions of the world.

Herring is a key ingredient in many Scandinavian dishes and small pelagics are common in Mediterranean diets.

But in most of the world, they are a tough sell. "They're small, they're bony and they're hard to eat," Alder said.

Part of the solution is finding creative ways to cook them.

"I'd never eat a tin of sardines. The smell almost gets me out the door," Alder said. "But I've eaten [sardines] when they've been really nicely prepared. Chefs can do wonders."

Small pelagics also have some other things going for them.

"These are cheap fish to catch, so rather than paying \$20, \$30 a kilo for one species of fish, you might be able to get a very healthy meal of fish for half or a third of that price," she said.

Small pelagics are loaded with omega-3 and omega-6 fatty acids, which some studies have shown reduce the risk of heart disease.

"If you want a healthy fish to eat, these are the guys to go for."

Alder, until recently a researcher at UBC's Fisheries Centre, recently took a new job as chief of marine and coastal ecosystems at the United Nations in Nairobi, Kenya.

Her study was published in the most recent edition of the journal Annual Review of Environment and Resources.

(Check out The Vancouver Sun's Science in B.C. blog at vancouver.sun.com/scienceinbc/)

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