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April 20, 2011

How Healthy Are Our Fisheries?

To the Editor:

In “[Let Us Eat Fish](#)” (Op-Ed, April 15), Ray Hilborn writes that studies showing a worldwide decline in fish stocks are exaggerated and that most fish stocks are stable.

A patient in critical condition can also be stable. We reached “peak fish” in the late 1980s despite the continuous expansion of fishing grounds, and fishermen are losing their jobs because of the overexploitation of stocks.

The spectacular recovery of fish inside marine reserves highlights the declines elsewhere. I have seen the decline in fish abundance myself while diving for 25 years worldwide.

Fisheries that are well managed can rebound, but these are still only a small percentage of fisheries worldwide. Let’s replicate the few success stories and improve the toolkit for managing fisheries to rebuild fish stocks and provide jobs and food security. But we should not use a few successful examples to pretend that everything is fine.

ENRIC SALA

Washington, April 17, 2011

The writer, an ocean fellow at the National Geographic Society, is a co-author of “Impacts of Biodiversity Loss on Ocean Ecosystem Services,” a 2006 study cited in the Op-Ed article.

To the Editor:

Ray Hilborn deftly dismantles the questionable science behind predictions of oceans without fish. His insight that there is little correlation between how many fish are caught and how many exist applies to Atlantic bluefin tuna. With the bluefin’s extensive migration and depth range, long life and unpredictable behavior, catch statistics can’t capture its real abundance.

So are bluefin really on the brink of extinction? What we and fishermen see — increasing availability of juveniles, shifts in distribution away from New England fisheries and resurgence elsewhere — suggests that bluefin may soon join the list of species on the rebound. That is, if the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas’ member nations stay the

course.

MOLLY LUTCAVAGE

Gloucester, Mass., April 15, 2011

The writer is director of the Large Pelagics Research Center and a research professor at the University of Massachusetts Amherst.

To the Editor:

Ray Hilborn says that ecologically conscious Americans can eat fish with a clear conscience. But it isn't just an ecological question. There is no humane slaughter requirement for fish.

Fish caught in nets by trawlers are dumped on board the ship and allowed to suffocate. Impaling a live bait fish on a hook is a common commercial practice, used in longline fishing with hundreds or even thousands of hooks. Gill nets — walls of fine netting — often snare fish by the gills. Many suffocate because with their gills constricted, they cannot breathe. Or they may stay there for many hours before the nets are pulled in.

We would not accept any of these methods of killing pigs or cows. Why are we indifferent to the suffering of fish?

PETER SINGER

Princeton, N.J., April 15, 2011

The writer is a professor of bioethics at Princeton University.

To the Editor:

Ray Hilborn is right to praise the United States. It does a much better job managing its fisheries than do most other countries. Indeed, it would be wonderful if other countries had legislation similar to the [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#) that would compel them to rebuild the overfished stocks of Europe, South America, Africa and Asia.

And it would be great if other leaders followed the example of President George W. Bush, who created a system of marine protected areas in the Pacific Ocean, for which he will be rightly remembered.

We agree that regulating and rebuilding fisheries is a good thing. Let's not weaken Magnuson-Stevens, and let's try to get similar legislation elsewhere.

DANIEL PAULY

Vancouver, British Columbia April 17, 2011

The writer is a professor of fisheries at the University of British Columbia and principal investigator of the Sea Around Us Project.

To the Editor:

I enjoyed a brief euphoric moment while reading “Let Us Eat Fish” until I was awakened by reality. I very much agree with Ray Hilborn’s premise that we should eat fish — but we’d better choose the fish that we eat with the greatest care.

I even agree that New England haddock is one example of a success story. New England haddock, looked at by itself, is well managed and prosperous. But that is not a healthy stock because it is living in an unhealthy ecosystem where so many of the cod and halibut the haddock should be swimming with are no longer there.

One of the persistent mistakes of both biologists and fishery managers is to look at the problem species by species rather than as an ecosystem. As Darwin noted, it takes a lot of other species to maintain a healthy species.

We cannot afford to follow Mr. Hilborn’s advice and “accept some depleted species.” We have to fix the problem before the whole system collapses.

MARK KURLANSKY

New York, April 18, 2011

The writer is the author of “World Without Fish” and “Cod.”

To the Editor:

Ray Hilborn’s suggestion that we should accept some “depleted species” as the price for long-term gains in the number of fish available for human consumption is alarmingly shortsighted. Mr. Hilborn reasons that if we can’t eat fish, we will eat more beef, chicken and pork, causing much greater environmental degradation than fish consumption.

While he is certainly right about the destructive force of animal agribusiness, the idea that our food choices are limited to animals is a myth that will lead to further degradation not only of the environment but also of human health and global food equity, as well as animal suffering. In order to face a future with ever-increasing billions of us alive on this planet, humans must return to eating a plant-centric diet.

MARIANN SULLIVAN

4/20/2011

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New York, April 15, 2011

The writer is co-founder of Our Hen House, an animal rights organization, and an adjunct professor of animal law at Benjamin N. Cardozo and Brooklyn Law Schools.