

A Sustainable Environment: Our Obligation to Protect God's Gift

by
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The Depletion of a Critical Natural Resource: Fish

As the demand for eating “healthy” food continues to grow, there is an increasing demand for eating fish. But as the human population continues to grow, and fish consumption per capita continues to grow, what is going to happen to the fish population? Or better yet, what *has* happened to the fish population?

Let me start out by stating that many of the popular fish species have been over-harvested and are at risk of becoming extinct. The fishermen are catching all the fish they can sell with no regard to the sustainability of that species. In addition, the majority of the fish come from the same tropical waters that feed the developing nations. In a disturbing study published by the International Food Policy Research Institute in Washington, it states that nearly 80% of the world's seafood soon will be extracted from the same tropical waters surrounding the developing nations that are contributing to the exploding population growth.

But let's take a look at some of the popular fish that are sold at the top restaurants today. Chilean Sea Bass has become a very popular fish since the early 1990s because of its meaty texture and fine taste. Its real name is Patagonian Toothfish, something that is not very appealing. No wonder the name was changed. This species is so over-harvested that it may be extinct within five years, unless the demand is significantly reduced. Currently, over 80% of this fish is caught illegally by pirate fishermen.

Long-term over-fishing of Atlantic cod has sent the stock into a drastic decline. It will take several decades for this species to recover. Although there are over 85 species of grouper, most of the grouper in the U.S. comes from the Gulf of Mexico. This fish has also been over-harvested, primarily from Mexican fishermen, which are subject to less regulations. Orange roughy live to over 100 years of age, grow slowly and don't spawn until age 20. Fishermen find them in large populations just when they start to spawn, and thus have reduced the stock of this fish. Atlantic swordfish stock has also been very low, but is now starting to recover. However, it should still be avoided. If you can tell the difference, go for Pacific swordfish whose population is stable. In general, all of these fish should be avoided until their populations recover.

Another problem with certain fish is the environmental damage that can occur with fish farms. A fish in particular is farm-raised salmon, which come from Chile, Norway, or Canada and a small amount is farmed in the U.S. Raising salmon in net pens releases fish waste into the water and can spread disease and parasites to wild salmon. Although the farming practices have improved, the demand for farm-raised salmon has increased over 400% in the past decade, thus increasing the pollution problem. A great alternative is wild salmon. However, earlier this month the White House proposed an 80% reduction

in the miles of rivers and streams to come under federal protection for Pacific salmon. At the same time, it rejected any possibility of removing hydropower dams that have decimated the fish's reproductive capacity.

Another popular fish, particularly in Greek restaurants, is red snapper. The largest U.S. fishery for true "red" snapper operates in the Gulf of Mexico, where it is considered over-fished. Much of our imported snapper comes from Brazil and Mexico. A recent study by the University of North Carolina showed that about 75% of the red snapper sold in stores and restaurants is not really red snapper, but rather some other species resembling red snapper, like rockfish. Red snapper can be as large as 35 pounds, and a legal catch must be a minimum of 15 inches.

We can protect this natural resource, God's gift to the people, if everyone is more careful in selecting fish that are not over-harvested. If you want to learn more about the best choices for eating fish and what to avoid, go to the website of the Monterey Bay Aquarium: www.mbayaq.org.

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