

Plant Based Food to Restore the Oceans

Bykill, Longlines, and Driftnets

(The second installment of a four-part series on plant based alternatives to seafood.)

Public awareness of our overfished oceans has lagged due to lack of publicity in the popular media. Ecologist Dr. Carl Safina of the National Audubon Society's Living Oceans Program says, "Marine creatures...are well hidden beneath the waves....Because fish are largely out of sight and out of mind, we tend not to shed sympathy on their predicament." A serious predicament it is.

One of the most wasteful aspects of modern fishing is the bykill of non-target species. Turtles, unwanted fishes, and marine mammals are snagged by driftnets and longlines. A shocking 1/4 to 1/3 of the worldwide fish catch is wasted, tossed overboard dead. Some marine wildlife, such as sea turtles and albatrosses, snatch the baited hooks of longlines and drown as the lines sink, a major cause of mortality.

Longlines with up to 40 miles of baited hooks came into common use in the 20th century. They have unsustainably exploited the top predators: swordfish, tunas, and sharks. Swordfish that used to be harpooned individually are now caught in massive numbers on longlines and in driftnets. Eighty percent of the female swordfish captured are immature, killed before they can breed. The average size of a North Atlantic swordfish has dropped from 270 pounds before longlines to 90 pounds more recently. Foreign-caught swordfish as pathetically small as 15 pounds are marketed in the United States.

Although sharks elicit little sympathy from most people they are top predators in the marine food chain and play a vital role in marine ecology. They generally grow and reproduce slowly and are highly vulnerable to human exploitation for their fins, skin, cartilage, and teeth. In the open seas deaths of sharks as bykill have reduced "...several important Atlantic shark species by 85-90% since the early 1980s," says Dr. Safina. Sharks are also being decimated by a particularly wasteful practice known as "finning". Their fins are cut off for shark fin soup, and the live animals minus fins and tails are dumped overboard to die.

Gear cast off by commercial fishers is an additional hazard to marine life. Earth Island Institute reports that each year some 500 miles of non-biodegradable "ghost nets" are set adrift by fishing fleets and entangle an unknown number of fish, seabirds, and sea mammals. They sink when they become full, rise to the surface once bodies decompose, and repeat the cycle.

Unfortunately, there are serious political obstacles to restoring our overfished seas. A New York Times editorial (Sept. 13, 1998) states that "Eight regional councils created to regulate domestic fishing [are] all dominated by fishing interests that put short-term financial goals ahead of...preserving fish stocks."

Personal choices can help to reduce the current assaults on marine wildlife. Rather than consume beleaguered marine creatures we can enjoy the delicious flavors of plant based

food. Those of us who like crab cakes can delight our families and guests with Mock Crab Cakes. Mock Crab Cakes are prepared with healthful tempeh and tofu, both made from nutritious soybeans. Their superb flavor and texture stand on their own merits. Unlike crab, some species overfished and all containing cholesterol, tempeh and tofu are plentiful and 100% cholesterol-free. Enjoy these tasty crab-free cakes, and know that the crustaceans you spared continue to fulfill their role in the marine ecosystem.