

Plant Based Foods to Restore the Oceans:
Healthy People, Healthy Oceans
(*The last of four installments.*)

Some food writers and health workers have encouraged the eating of fish because fatty fish such as salmon contain the heart-protecting omega-3 fatty acid, eicosapentaenoic acid (EPA). Conservation-minded health educators emphasize that it is not necessary to eat fish to obtain the omega-3 essential fatty acid (alpha-linolenic acid) from which one's body can make EPA. (Virginia Messina M.P.H., R.D. and Mark Messina, Ph.D., *The Dieticians Guide to Vegetarian Diets*, 1996)

The good news is that the human body can produce its own EPA from a wide variety of easily available plant foods that contain alpha-linolenic acid. Such foods include flaxseed oil, flaxseed, canola and soybean oils, tofu, walnuts, leafy green vegetables, and wheat germ. EPA is an issue that people who eat a varied all-plant diet rich in these foods don't worry about. Their risk of heart disease is very low. Production of EPA is also enhanced by using olive oil and canola oil in meal preparation rather than sunflower, safflower, or corn oils. As for protein, a varied diet of grains, legumes, vegetables, and fruits provides more than enough protein for optimal health.

Because of the high levels of mercury that can be found in marine fish, health departments in eight states advise sensitive populations such as pregnant or nursing mothers and young children to limit or avoid consumption of fish such as tuna, swordfish, and shark (*Consumers Report*, Feb. 2001). These long-lived fish can accumulate a lifetime's worth of toxins before they are caught and consumed by people.

This series of articles has mentioned various solutions proposed to restore our oceans: controlling overfishing, regulating the use of mechanized fishing gear, improving aquaculture, reducing bykill, marketing former "trash" fish as new specialties, setting fish quotas, and basing fishing regulations on science rather than politics. However, all presuppose that people continue to consume fish much as they do now. Informed consumers are questioning whether eating fish can be justified when the marine ecosystem has been so radically disturbed by human activities. It is time to stop plundering the seas of their marine life and turn to the abundance of plant-based foods.

Food writers, health workers, and restaurants that promote the consumption of seafood must consider our oceans' troubled ecosystems. The well-fed people of the world do not need to have shrimp and other marine wildlife on their plates. People in the world's developed nations, for whom seafood is not a necessity, have the opportunity - the responsibility - to eat less fish or no fish, and to leave the seas' wildlife alone. Human beings are said to be adaptable. Surely, it is easier for humans to adapt to feasting on delicious plant-based meals than for the sea miraculously to survive the current assault on its wildlife and their habitat.

Leafy greens are a tasty source of the same omega-3 fatty acids that are found in fish. People who give leafy greens a serious trial are amazed to find that eating them becomes a pleasurable and healthful habit. Few can resist greens when they are prepared Italian style with garlic, pine nuts, raisins, and olive oil. Choose "red" kale, regular kale, and Swiss chard for this recipe. Cook it until it is fork tender. Cooking time is shortest for Swiss chard, which cooks in a few minutes, longer for red kale, and longest for regular kale. All greens are exceptionally nutritious.

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