



11921 Freedom Drive, Suite 550-PMB 5580, Reston, VA 20190
(703) 450-9852 Fax (703) 450-9853 Email: tjlassen@oceantrust.org

Seafood “Crisis” Feeds On Itself, Not On Science

Thor Lassen, President

The “fisheries crisis” lead in the “Troubled Waters” article (August 1, 2001) reminds me of a 1995 *Washington Post* op-ed from Michael Parfit, a *National Geographic* writer who armed himself with environmental reports on the worldwide fisheries collapse, conducted a year of studying the alleged crisis, and concluded that he couldn’t find the “disaster.”

“Disasters aren’t the problem,” noted Parfit. “The real environmental catastrophe is the slow creep of crud.” The crisis du jour is the same. I have spent ten years trying to pin down the fisheries crisis without success. What I found instead is that overfishing has been reduced and recovery plans have been put in place for almost all U.S. species.

As top fishery scientists have pointed out, the appropriate response to overfishing is to reduce effort at sea. It is widely known that quotas and harvest levels have been reduced. Fishermen and their families are making sacrifices needed to restore the stocks by adhering to these management restrictions. Boycotting a product on a group’s list doesn’t change catch levels established by the management councils, it only closes markets to legitimate fishermen, adding further pressure on coastal fishing communities.

Take Atlantic swordfish, for example. It is not “decimated” nor endangered. As recently reported by Glenn Delaney, a U.S. Commissioner to the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the swordfish boycott had no impact on the management of North Atlantic stock, which is rebuilding as a result of international management under a restricted harvest quota. The boycott did close out some high-end markets for fresh domestic swordfish, and hurt the same U.S. fishermen who were leading the conservation battle in ICCAT to lower foreign quotas. Meanwhile, the sale of imported swordfish tripled as consumers responded to lower prices. Isn’t that ironic.

The same potential scenario exists for many of the species on environmental seafood lists. We forget that at the other end of the fish lists are working families and coastal communities dependent on markets to sell product harvested under strict government regulations. Commercial food producing fisheries are the third-heaviest federally regulated industry in America. The National Marine Fisheries Service is the lead agency with several hundred marine scientists, yet their science and management are tossed aside at the whim of a list published by private interest groups, many of whom have no fishery science expertise yet make unqualified statements about the status of seafood resources.

Like a rumor that passes from person to person, the fisheries crisis has taken on a life of its own, taking readers on a journey far removed from science with an urgency that seems to extrapolate with each new rendition. Contrary to the public relations efforts of groups pushing lists of favored species, the vast majority of fishery products consumed in the United States are sustainably managed.

Before adhering to a seafood list or service, consider the fact that your name may be used to give credibility to the cause. So, find out what agenda you’re supporting, get the facts

and make an informed decision with reliable information on fisheries. We recommend www.nmfs.noaa.gov as a principle source. Ocean Trust provides fishery assessments without telling readers what to do. Here are a few facts from our review at www.oceantrust.org/news that have not been presented by seafood guides:

- *All wild shrimp sold in the U.S. are caught with turtle excluder devices. They are used everywhere, not just in Georgia.*
- *In the early days of shrimp aquaculture some governments encouraged construction in tidal mangrove areas, but actual conversion into farms was responsible for less than 4% of the total mangrove loss. Mangroves have been used primarily for wood and charcoal production. Today, these areas are protected in all major shrimp producing nations.*
- *New England sea scallops are not overfished, but producing large counts as a result of good management. Most chefs should know about the sea scallop recovery by now.*
- *Atlantic cod are in the midst of a large recovery, so much so that fishermen are having trouble avoiding cod while fishing for other species, as reported by the Boston Globe.*
- *Rockfish not only consist of more than 60 species, the stocks go from California to the Bering Sea, each with its own status and management profile. Not all are overfished and those that are are already heavily restricted.*
- *Chilean sea bass does have a notorious unregulated fishery, but there is also production from a closely managed fishery that exports product under a certification program that is required for all sea bass imported into the United States.*

If the seafood lists are so far off on the obvious species status and only give half the story to support their position, doesn't this raise questions on other information provided by these groups? Seafood boycotts are not a good way to manage fisheries. Instead of boycotting species, support fisheries that are working to rebuild stocks. Direct your concerns to regional fishery management councils. These are open forums where everyone has a seat at the table: government, industry, environmentalists, and science-based, consensus decisions prevail. It's a better way to manage fisheries. More importantly, it is working.

By the way, the Monterey sardine crash was one of many stock fluctuation responses to ocean events that have been occurring for hundreds of years in the absence of fishing. Fishing may have accelerated the population decline, but did overfishing cause the crash? Look at Baumgardner's 1,750 year time series from fish scale deposits off southern California that demonstrates the cyclical nature of sardine populations, then decide.

1950 Monterey Sardine Collapse:
Overfishing or Natural Population Cycles?

Ocean Trust is a non-profit foundation working with seafood communities, scientists and local conservation groups on fisheries, habitat and wildlife enhancement.

