



Andrew B. Myers

OPINION
GUEST ESSAY

Too Much of Our Seafood Has a Dark Secret

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By Paul Greenberg and Carl Safina
Mr. Greenberg and Dr. Safina have been writing books, articles and essays about the world's oceans for three decades.
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This essay is part of [What to Eat on a Burning Planet](#), a series exploring bold ideas to secure our food supply. Read more about this project in a [note](#) from Eliza Barclay, Opinion's climate editor.

Not that long ago, if you saw a piece of fish on your plate, you wouldn't have thought to ask where it came from or whether it was sustainable.

That began to change in the 1990s as conservation groups fought to protect all kinds of life in the ocean from overfishing. After persuading Congress to create and enforce strict plans to bring back species, they set in motion a [virtuous cycle](#) that made seafood, from the mighty swordfish to the humble [sea scallop](#), abundant again. New rules for other species have had similarly positive effects. Sea turtles that once drowned in shrimp nets can now escape. Fewer diving [seabirds](#) are getting caught on fishing lines. [And limits on fishing](#) smaller species such as [menhaden](#) mean that whales off our coasts have more to eat and today can be seen cavorting within sight of the Statue of Liberty. What's more, American commercial and recreational fisheries generated 35 percent more sales [in 2022](#) than in [2018](#).

But walk into your local supermarket, and you may still be buying snapper blasted from their reefs by [Indonesian fishermen using dynamite](#) or [illegally caught](#) yellowfin tuna and squid. U.S. fisheries may be much improved, but up to 80 percent of the fish and shellfish on American plates is [imported](#). Much of it comes via obscure international seafood conglomerates that purchase fish from companies that have been accused of fishing illegally and profiting from forced labor, as the nonprofit [Outlaw Ocean Project](#) has documented.

We in wealthy nations unwittingly support these abuses by using the world's supply of fish as if it were a limitless line of credit. But this credit is running out. The global catch of fish and other wildlife in the ocean peaked in the 1990s and has since drifted steadily [downward](#). Soon, not even forced labor may be able to squeeze profit out of the remaining wild fish.

Expanding fish farming, or aquaculture, was once thought to be a potential solution to this problem, but it has also not, as hoped, given wild fish the break they need. Salmon and shrimp, Americans' [favorite](#) farmed seafoods, are still fed *wild* fish caught in poorly regulated [foreign waters](#). Highly nutritious fish, such as [anchovies](#) and sardines, that make up 20 percent to 30 percent of the global catch are fed to salmon and shrimp — a staggering waste of protein.

Clearly, both wild and farmed seafood have a long way to go before they are actually sustainable.

So what do we need to put truly safe, resilient and ethically procured fish and shellfish on everybody's plates? Consumers can make better choices, but to move past depletion and abuse, governments need to institute new fishery management laws, accompanied by rigorous enforcement.

The path to an ocean governed by the rule of law begins with more eyes on the fishing industry. Organizations such as [Global Fishing Watch](#) and its partners have already started shining light on fishing vessels that once operated undetected in foreign jurisdictions and on the high seas. That light needs to shine brighter around the globe.

Governments need to stop subsidizing overfishing. Many state fishery agencies underwrite fuel and shipbuilding, which has resulted in vessels that can travel farther and fish longer. China alone spends billions on these efforts.

The habitats in which wild fish thrive also need governments to defend them. Only about [7 percent](#) of the world's oceans enjoy some sort of official protection. The United Nations wants to change this with its [30 by 30](#) initiative to set aside 30 percent of the ocean (and land) by the year 2030. Far too often, these protected zones are merely delineated on a map, devoid of meaningful enforcement. A sustainable seafood supply will require resources to shield fish from exploitation where they breed and grow.

International cooperation is needed to mandate fair wages and safe working conditions and to prosecute companies that benefit from kidnapping and forced labor in their supply chains. Regulatory agencies in the United States and abroad need better access to supply-chain data, labor contracts and environmental infractions so that large retailers and distributors, including [Sysco](#) and [Walmart](#), can assure customers they're not buying fish caught illegally or brought to market with forced labor.

We can also bring more value to those who practice clean, selective fishing, such as swordfish harpooning and Alaska salmon netting, with labeling that distinguishes their products from fish produced using more damaging methods.

And lastly, we must change how we feed farmed animals in the growing aquaculture industry. Many [alternatives](#) to grinding up anchovies, herring and menhaden for fish feed already exist — from algae to soldier fly larvae. These feeds should be scaled up and put to wide use.

And what you choose to buy and eat still matters. If you're planning a meal with seafood, we have a few suggestions.

First, because the United States has become a world leader in ocean protection, fish recovery and enforcement, choose American-caught seafood when possible.

Next, choose farmed clams, oysters and mussels when you can. They feed by filtering the water. Because they don't consume other fish, none should be killed to bring them to market.

Third, go small. Bigger fish have been hit especially hard by industrial fishing. And those large fish often accumulate toxins, including methylmercury. Animals lower on the food chain, such as anchovies, reproduce and rebuild their numbers in the face of fishing pressure more quickly. As an added benefit, they also tend to have lower levels of pollutants.

If the fish in front of you was caught in U.S. waters and can fit whole on your plate, it's about the best meal from the sea you can get. And if nothing truly good from the sea is on offer, it might be better to cook something else for dinner.

[Paul Greenberg](#) teaches in New York University's Animal Studies Program and is the author of the James Beard Award-winning "Four Fish: The Future of the Last Wild Food." [Carl Safina](#) holds the Endowed Research Chair for Nature and Humanity at Stony Brook University and is author of "Song for the Blue Ocean: Encounters Along the World's Coasts and Beneath the Seas."

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