

To Eat, or Not to Eat?

It's no simple question when it comes to seafood.

by Hugh Hough

I normally cook on weekends. – in In most cases, that means BBQ!

So, today I'm at the fish market, and I'm confronted with a huge dilemma. It's not what to cook on the grill (I can cook anything), but, as an Awakening Consumer, I am wondering just what the "right" fish for my "green" grill is?

One of the ugliest but most delicious fish you can put on your grill is the Chilean sea bass—aka the Patagonia tooth fish. This delicious white-meat fish, whose name was changed for marketing purposes, grows in frigid Patagonian waters. It takes many years to begin to produce offspring, and it can live for eighty to one hundred years. Chilean sea bass are kind of like an old-growth fish, but overfishing has depleted them. In a few years, there'll probably be none left. Obviously, grilling a Chilean sea bass is not a good idea.

How about monkfish? – I love it (very tasty and tender—known as a "poor man's lobster"), but, like the Chilean sea bass, it's also a slow-growing fish and is being destroyed by over-fishing. It too will probably be extinct soon. Oh well...

Hmmm, how about some big fish steaks, like tuna or swordfish? Both are awesome when grilled! But these big open-water species are also being overfished—almost 90% of them. In this case, huge fishing factories sit shoulder to shoulder on the high seas with nets over more than 30 miles wide that gobble up every animal in sight, essentially strip mining our oceans.

Dr. Sylvia Earle, a marine biologist and a leading spokesperson for the ocean, passionately equates eating our large marine fish, such as wild tuna and swordfish, to eating large, wild land mammals, such as panda. Maybe I shouldn't eat wild tuna either.

What about some shrimp on the barbie? Awesome! But for every pound of shrimp caught in the open seas, four pounds are "wasted." Other fish—turtles and, yes, occasionally dolphins—are also caught in the shrimp nets and tossed back to sea in a process is known as bycatch.

On top of this terrible waste is the horrible effect some of the trawlers have on the sea floor. The trawlers chew up the sea bottom like bulldozers going through a forest.

But farmed shrimp is OK, isn't it? Not really. Most of the farmed shrimp that we buy here in the U.S. comes to us from Latin America and South East Asia. Countries in these regions grow the shrimp along the shores and estuaries in pools and pens where mangroves (the ocean's feeding grounds and nurseries) have been clear-cut to make room for them. Also, the waste generated from these shrimp farms, including pesticides and fertilizers is getting into the fresh water systems of those countries, causing serious health concerns to for local populations. So far, shrimp seem to be the worst idea I've had today.

Let's move on ...

What about farmed fish? They should be OK, right? Salmon is made for the barbeque! Farmed salmon are raised in open oceans and estuaries like the ones in New Brunswick (northeast Canada), but here's the catch. Since these "couch-potato" fish are not exposed to selection in the wild, they are genetically weak and, therefore, vulnerable to disease. These "weak" salmon escape and mix with the wild salmon, transmitting diseases into the "wild." In addition, the farmed salmon are fed ground fish meal made from wild fish, such as mullet. So, the farmed salmon give a double punch to our wild fish populations.

Here, then, is my dilemma: do I listen to my stomach or to my conscience?

At the fish store, the fish are dead already, right? But that's just a poor excuse.

You see, we now live in an era when knowledge IS power. There are things that we know that we didn't know before.

Knowledge is what makes the Awakening Consumer. Knowledge is what is driving our eating habits: organic going mainstream; smoking being ousted from public spaces; sodas being removed from our schools. And yes, we are finally looking at our oceans NOT as bottomless pits but as fragile and valuable eco-systems.

Only a few years back, we denied there was something called global warming. While some Ws in our government still deny it, most people now agree there is a problem, and we need to address it. Look at the success of Al Gore's new movie *An Inconvenient Truth*. Maybe we can do something about global warming today, instead of waiting until it's too late.

Knowledge is power—power to do something. Our home is being decimated by these large fishing trawlers. We need to use that knowledge to try to stop that, to force our government into action.

I spoke to my good friend Dr. Mary Hagedorn, a marine biologist who is working to preserve our oceans, especially our coral reefs, through cryopreservation (but that's another story). I wanted to ask her what I should do. You see, knowledge IS power!

"Sometimes I am very conflicted myself when I eat fish!" she said. "I really think that you have to do what you feel is right. Personally, I do not eat

slow-growth fish like orange roughy, (which, by the way, was McDonald's choice of fish for McFish until it became almost extinct), swordfish, sea bass, or shark. I tend to go for the local fish; that way, I feel better about what I eat.

"Part of my job is to educate people on the dire straights our oceans are in, but I feel it is more important to educate our grocers. We must eat from local sources, and work on ways to stop the devastation of those terrible factory fishing boats."

Mary, like many consumers, is worried when she goes to the fish market. She urges people to eat lightly from the lists of fish that are threatened or threaten the environment but to stay away from endangered species. There are various organizations like Environmental Defense, a Green Team client, or the Audubon Society, that publish guides to what seafood we can eat without feeling guilty. (www.oceansalive.org/eat.cfm). Check out these guides.

It looks like Mary is letting me off the hook (no pun intended!). OK, I admit I am not perfect. Far from it. And yes, my grill has occasionally been adorned by shrimp or tuna, but every once in a while my conscience wins. I guess that is what makes me an Awakening Consumer.

We say that the Awakening Consumer is awakening to the power of their his or her pocketbook. Well, here the fish market is one place where we can use that power to do what we feel is right to protect our oceans and all the creatures within.

With assistance from Dr. Mary Hagedorn

Mary Hagedorn, Ph.D., of the Smithsonian Institution, is one of the world's leading marine biologists, an expert of coral reefs and a lover of environmentally-sound seafood.