

A-FISH-IONADOS

A PASSION FOR FISH

BY ANDREW SPURGIN

When I lived in Mission Beach in the late '70s, my friend Toch and I would often sneak onto the campus of Point Loma Nazarene College. We'd hike a bit and then scale down the cliff right next to Garbage Beach on a rope that someone had put there. We were going free diving for abalone. The diving there was amazing and the abalone were a dime a dozen. We'd marinate them in homemade teriyaki sauce, hibachi them and then feast.

That experience is impossible to replicate now. The abalone have disappeared.

I first began to notice species were becoming scarce and costs were rising over a decade ago. "What's going on?" I asked myself. What I learned is that the problem is extremely complex. Reducing it down (as chefs are apt to do): Society profoundly misjudged the capacity of the ocean. There are simply fewer fish in the sea. And, because we knew less than we thought we did, we overfished. We also polluted the waters. Now, all is not well under those shimmering waves we enjoy in San Diego and around the world.

The situation is most dire for certain species that are fished on the high seas, in particular, for highly migratory oceanic sharks. Jeremiah

Sullivan, a local marine biologist and inventor of the chain mail Neptunic shark suit, observes that "30 years ago, on a glassy day you could count dozens of blue sharks swimming at the surface in the open water between the Scripps Pier and La Jolla Cove. When working on film projects for 'Wild Kingdom' we would see at least 50 sharks gather. Now there are none or, at best, they are extremely rare."

In 2000, I set out with two friends to do our part: We started Passionfish.org. The three of us, each from a different perspective—Patricia Parisi, a journalist; Carl Rebstock, a marine scientist; and I, a chef—had independently been trying to find our way through a blizzard of conflicting accusations and assertions about the status of the ocean and who should do what about it. We found navigating that storm easier when we invited input from diverse viewpoints.

Our small but proactive nonprofit pursues civic engagement through public forums, annual events, blog postings, education and dialogue. We've been joined by Chef Gerard Viverito, an associate professor at the Culinary Institute of America. I have also teamed with Blue Ocean Institute's Green Chefs, Blue Ocean program to develop a web-based educational program to teach people around the world about sustainability.

So how serious is overfishing or bad farming practice? Perilous, but there's reason for optimism. Clear progress in fisheries management has been made over the last several years. Although most wild fish stocks remain overfished, concerted global efforts have helped to broadly stabilize the situation—with heartening developments in certain fisheries. In order to continue building a healthy seafood industry, we need to do less fishing and more farming. Balancing stability for fishermen while moving toward more ecologically sustainable fisheries must be the aim.

Because the world's capture fisheries have essentially plateaued, I'm convinced that aquaculture must grow in significance. I'm in good company. Jacques Cousteau recognized in



California scorpionfish

Photograph: Andrew Spurgin



1973 that “We must learn to farm the sea as we farm the land.” And Don Kent, president of the Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute (HSWRI), says quite matter-of-factly, “We cannot catch more fish, so we need to grow them.” Already almost 50 percent of the world’s food fish are farmed.

Aquaculture is the oft-maligned and much misunderstood centuries-old practice of farming fish. The role of aquaculture is now central to most discussions and studies focused on the future of the fisheries. Whether it be the common carp, which was fed in ponds from Chinese silkworm farm castings 4,500 years ago; the billions of salmon smolt raised in hatcheries for release annually into Alaskan waters; or abalone in the holds of the *MV Destiny Queen*—a converted cargo ship and the world’s first offshore floating seafood farm—aquaculture helps meet our world’s appetite for seafood. Despite what you may have heard, not all fish farming is bad.

Mariculture, which is aquaculture of the sea, can be confusing. But innovation in this area is on the rise. Two nearby examples worth watching are HSWRI and developments in Baja California.

The signature success of HSWRI, with over 30 years of aquaculture research, has been to restore our once severely depleted stocks of white seabass, a popular game fish. Today, HSWRI is poised to demonstrate that striped bass can be economically and environmentally hatchery raised and then reared in pens just five miles off Mission Beach. By contrast, the pens in Mexican waters contain northern bluefin tuna. These fish were captured as juveniles and are being fattened for market. The disappearance of our once sizable Southern California tuna fishing fleet is proof positive that these stocks are at a fraction of their historic highs. Both ventures are being carefully studied to better understand promises and impacts.

Of course, sometimes the old-fashioned ideas are the best. As Dan Nattrass of Catalina Offshore Products observes, “In the 15 years I have been buying fish for Catalina Offshore Products, I’ve gotten to know incredibly resilient people who fish with very rudimentary equipment, and yet produce an amazingly fresh and quality product. No poles, no reels, no nets, just three guys in a 16-foot *panga* [Span-

ish for small boat]. The handline method of fishing is one of the most low-impact techniques available.”

But good news remains the exception, not the rule. Happily, collaborative endeavors such as Passionfish.org are on the rise and their hard-won successes are yielding promising results. Many of these initiatives embrace the notion that leveraging market forces is more productive and durable than battling industry. Christian Graves, the executive chef of Jsix at Hotel Solamar, says it best:

“With every dollar you spend you are voting! Sustainable seafood is paramount to me for two reasons: First, I feel my buying power affects the decisions made by the people with whom I do business, and second, I want my three sons to be moved by the same foods with which I have love affairs.”

What are some simple things you can do to help? One answer is to choose seafood carrying the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification. The MSC logo assures buyers that the fish they are purchasing comes from a well-managed fishery. However, the MSC only certifies wild fisheries; it does not evaluate farmed fish.

Another option is to consult the FishPhone before purchasing. Text the word *fish* followed by the name of the seafood you’re considering to “306-44,” then wait for an automated response. This service, offered by Blue Ocean Institute, heavily weighs environmental criteria but tends to be well researched. (The Seafood Watch program by the Monterey Bay Aquarium has a similar approach as an app for the iPhone. I use both—see links.)

ANDREW'S "TOP 10" BEST CHOICES

1. Farmed oysters
2. U.S. Pacific sardines
3. Wild Alaskan salmon
4. Farmed abalone
(Wild Black abalone is now on the endangered list!)
5. Dungeness crab
6. Farmed caviar
7. U.S. Albacore tuna, troll- or pole-caught
8. Tie: Alaskan wild halibut and black cod
9. Farmed clams
10. Farmed Arctic char

ANDREW'S BOTTOM "NEVER WOULD TOUCH THEM" TEN

1. Sharks EVER!
2. Imported wild caviar
3. Chilean seabass/toothfish (MSC Certified OK)
4. Marlin: Blue or Striped
5. Orange roughy
6. Swordfish (imported)
7. Cod: Atlantic
8. Bluefin tuna
9. Shrimp (imported wild or farmed)
10. Farmed salmon
(Some new farms are doing good work, most are terrible)



Salt-crusted wild striped bass

Photograph: Andrew Spurgin

Finally, much can be learned about national fisheries from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) FishWatch website, while information about international fisheries is provided by the United Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations.

Don't buy shark. Virtually every species has been decimated. Similarly, highly coveted and costly fish can be risky. It's hard for purveyors to guard against those being supplied by the black market. You can't always be sure that what you think you're buying is what you're getting, or that it was legally caught. Chilean seabass is an early example of such a trendy, troubled fish—yet it is now available from an MSC-certified source.

With every purchase, every consumer can make a real difference following these three simple steps:

1. Ask questions. Informed consumers telegraph their interest in corporate responsibility through this simple act.

2. Purchase thoughtfully. Contributing to creating a market demand for products from the best purveyors is a great way to “save fish by buying fish.”

3. Donate to nonprofit organizations whose mission and values you support. Every dollar goes a long way in the hands of people passionate about what they do.

Andrew Spurgin is the executive director/chef and co-founder of Passionfish. For 31 years he has devoted his life to the culinary world. Whether designing menus and events for presidents, glitterati or the man on the street, his soul mission is to support, prepare, write and lecture about what's best, what's good and what's right. Knowing this allows him to fall asleep at night with a smile on his face. He can be reached through waterscatering.com.

RESOURCES

Blue Ocean Institute
www.blueocean.org

FishPhone
www.fishphone.org

Fish Watch
www.nmfs.noaa.gov/fishwatch

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
www.fao.org/fishery

Green Chefs, Blue Ocean
www.blueocean.org/programs/seafood/schooling-chefs

Hubbs-SeaWorld Research Institute
www.hswri.org

Marine Stewardship Council
www.msc.org

Monterey Bay Aquarium
www.mbayaq.org

Passionfish
www.passionfish.org



TRANSCENDENT

Taste and health – living in perfect harmony.
Explore the flavorful mysteries and versatility
of the many colorful varieties of USA Pears.

The path to enlightenment starts
at your local grocer.

www.usapears.org/divine

