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Watching Over Our Seafood Supply

BY LISÉ STERN

The [Monterey Bay Aquarium](#) in Monterey, California, consistently tops travel lists for Best Aquarium. And yes, it's a great place to see all kinds of aquatic wildlife. But it's also the home to [Seafood Watch](#), an organization that has been on the forefront of changing the way we catch and eat fish.

The term "sustainable seafood" gets dropped into food conversations a lot these days, as we become more aware of exactly what we're eating and where it comes from, be it meat, fish, or carrots. More and more San Francisco and Bay Area restaurants that serve fish are subscribing to sustainability practices. But what exactly does this mean?

The modern concept of sustainability is credited to the 1987 "United Nations Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: [Our Common Future](#)." According to the report, Sustainable development is "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." In 1996, Congress passed the [Sustainable Fisheries Act](#), which declared, among things, "Certain stocks of fish have declined to the point where their survival is threatened, and other stocks of fish have been so substantially reduced in number that they could become similarly threatened..."



Oysters, a great source of protein and one of many shellfish generally more sustainable than fin fish
credit: Monterey Bay Aquarium/Randy Wilder

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), a regulatory agency, has helped establish laws limiting overfishing and damaging methods of fishing. “People have become in recent years more concerned about the social and ecological implications of their purchases, and seafood is one of them,” says Amber Rhodes, Policy Analyst, Sustainable Fisheries Division, of NOAA. “The idea is that we’re managing fish stocks so they’re sustainable in the future.” NOAA runs the website [FishWatch](#), with the latest info on fish laws.

In 1997, the Monterey Bay Aquarium put on an exhibit, “Fishing for Solutions.” On [Grist.com](#), food writer Roz Cummings wrote, “The exhibit focused not only on the precariousness of the fish stocks that have been reduced by overfishing, but also on the environmental degradation caused by using heavy-handed harvesting techniques and slapdash fish farming. I remember feeling stunned and shell-shocked after seeing the exhibit.”

“Fishing for Solutions” led to the formation of Seafood Watch in 1999, which many credit with raising awareness about sustainability issues regarding seafood. Seafood Watch releases a state-by-state guide that rates [seafood into three categories](#): Green (Best Choices), Yellow (Good Alternatives), and Red (Avoid). I spoke with Ryan Bigelow, Outreach Program Manager for Seafood Watch, about the current fishy situation.



Seafood Watch outreach manager Ryan Bigelow
credit: Monterey Bay Aquarium/Tyson Rininger

LS: How did Seafood Watch start, and why?

RB: In 1997, the aquarium had a “Fishing for Solutions” exhibit about problems with the seafood industry. We thought, if we’re doing that, we’re going to have to take a look at the fish we’re using in our restaurants. We can’t talk about it and not be conscientious consumers. We took a hard look at the menu we provide guests. We made tabletop information cards and talked about different seafood options. Those triangles started disappearing – people were taking the tabletop lists. They weren’t designed for that! We thought we’d spend some time on something they could take, and that led to our original pocket guide. And that led to Seafood Watch. We started working out of an old house in

Monterey Bay, and we now have a team of over 20 people. We've distributed more than 52 million pocket guides. We have an [app, for iOS and Android](#), that's been downloaded 1.5 million times.

LS: What does Seafood Watch do today?

RB: We've developed a conservation partnership program with other aquariums. We provide talking points and pocket guides to other institutions so they can talk about Seafood Watch for free at their institutions. We also work with big food service providers, like Sysco and Aramark, Whole Foods, Disney. We have an advisory [Blue Ribbon Task Force](#), a panel of about 50 chefs.



Longspine thornyhead rockfish, a west coast groundfish
credit: Monterey Bay Aquarium/ L&L Langstroth

LS: Where do you get your information?

RB: One thing about Seafood Watch that differentiates it is our reports are all science based, and all transparent. Everything is based on scientific reports that are peer reviewed. [All our reports are available online](#) – that's part of our transparency.

LS: Who writes the reports?

RB: We have a team of 13 scientists. But there are so many fisheries, and so many reports, we use analysts in the field. They'll send a report to us so we can proof it in house. We'll check in and send it out. Since 90 percent of the fish we eat in the U.S. is imported, we need local scientists to write these reports.

LS: Define "fishery."

RB: Anywhere where you're catching fish. Specifically wild fish, *not* farmed fish.

We also look at farmed fish, or aquaculture. About 50 percent of the fish consumed in the U.S. comes from farmed fish.

LS: Is wild fish better than farmed?

RB: In the U.S., there's a really strong bias against farmed fish. And that is historically well founded. When it first started, they were using a lot of chemicals, there were some really dirty tilapia pens in China. Some of the worst farming is really, really bad. But it's like farming on land. It can be done really well – like the best grass-fed beef. And you can avoid some issues, like mercury contamination.

Some of the really cool fish farming is happening in middle of the country. Catfish has been at it a long time, but there are a lot of new methods for other fish. [Recirculating Aquacultural Systems \(RAS\)](#) is a really interesting direction we're taking. A lot of states throughout the Midwest are using it.

In the U.S., salmon is the main farmed fish, but internationally, it's a drop in the bucket. Internationally, carp and tilapia are farmed. There's a push for fish that's not a predator species.

LS: What's an example of a predator species?

RB: Tuna. It's the predator of the sea, not the chicken of the sea. It takes 15 pounds of fish from the ocean to create 1 pound of final tuna. There's a reason we don't eat tigers or wolves. It's more efficient to raise cows and pigs, because they eat plants. But we have developed a palate that prefers these large carnivorous species.



Bluefin tuna

LS: You mentioned mercury. Is that an issue in tuna?

RB: Our reports don't include mercury contamination as part of our concerns. Our expertise is on environmental issues. That said, it's tough to say. The amount of mercury a young woman wants to consume, vs. an old man, gender, body weight, desire for children, it all plays a role. [Environmental Working Group](#) is a good source for info on this.

As for tuna, younger, smaller tuna is going to have less mercury than larger tuna. [Wild Planet Foods](#) [which promotes sustainably caught tuna for canning], they're doing a pull and line catching – that method is by hand, and isn't strong enough to catch the 400 pound tuna. More like 20 pounds or so. So their tuna is going to have less mercury.

LS: What ways of catching fish would be considered sustainable?

RB: That's a tough question. It depends on how it's done. For the longest time, trawling had a reputation of being really damaging. If it's a muddy bottom, and there's not a lot down there, it can be done sustainably. But if there's a coral reef, that's not good. Ways that tend to be better are more traditional methods. Fishermen over the world are so good at what they do – but they've gotten too good at it; the oceans can't keep up, it's that simple. Some of the ways that are better are less effective. If you catch tuna on a hook and line,

you're *only* catching tuna. You're not catching turtles, or seabirds. It's more old-fashioned, but more environmentally sustainable.



Clams are typically a sustainable shellfish choice
credit: Monterey Bay Aquarium/Randy Wilder

LS: What's the most sustainable kind of seafood?

RB: Shellfish – clams, mussels, oysters, they all do well. All the things you want to avoid with farmed fin fish – packing in tight, not feeding enough – clams love that. They clean the

water around them. They're an amazing protein source. They pull everything they need right out of the ocean.

LS: What are your thoughts on consuming local seafood, given how much seafood consumed in the U.S. is imported?

RB: I think consuming local food is great. It provides the opportunity to learn more about your fisherman. You establish that relationship, even if it's just talking to the person who's selling the fish at the farmers' market. It's important to develop those relationships. Knowing who made your food and how it was made is important. That said, just because it's local doesn't mean the seafood is sustainable. It's important to ask, and to know about your food.

LS: What kind of influence does Seafood Watch have outside the US?

RB: A lot. Because if consumers want sustainable products, we have to provide it. We now have governments and countries coming to us asking what to do. They understand they don't have an infinite supply of fish.

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