

Columnists

Originally published October 19, 2012 at 6:40 PM | Page modified October 20, 2012 at 4:09 PM

Sustainable seafood apps, restaurants, cookbooks catch on

The sustainable seafood movement faces constant challenges as it balances the interests of fish sellers, fish catchers, environmental advocates and consumers.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

Just because there are lots of fish in the sea doesn't mean we have to eat them all.

The sustainable seafood movement aims to maintain the flow of safe, nutritious seafood without wiping out fish populations. Although significant progress has been made in recent years, this movement faces constant challenges as it balances the interests of fish sellers, fish catchers, environmental advocates and consumers.

Q: What's new with sustainable seafood?

A: The increasing visibility of this movement has made the biggest splash. Major grocery chains including Whole Foods Market and Albertsons/SuperValu made public commitments this year to sell more sustainable seafood. Many restaurants also continue to come on board.

Information about sustainable fish choices has become much more widely available lately, especially through smartphone apps.

Q: What are the best sustainable seafood guides?

A: The Seafood Watch guide (seattleaquarium.org/sustainable-seafood) developed by the Monterey Bay Aquarium in California leads the pack. Listing the most sustainable seafood choices as well as fish to avoid, this guide is also available in an app for Android and iPhone.

The Environmental Defense Fund's Seafood Selector guide (seati.ms/SXcZjc) also stands out. Some commercial fishermen say this guide best reflects fishermen's sustainability efforts.

Q: How about a few examples of sustainable seafood?

A: Tasty and sustainable fish widely available locally include Bristol Bay sockeye salmon and other wild Alaska salmon, pink Oregon shrimp and farmed scallops.

Q: Where can I find sustainable seafood?

A: Ask about sustainable seafood choices anywhere you eat or buy food, since most restaurants and grocery stores now offer at least a few options. The Seafood Retailer Scorecard released by the activist group Greenpeace in May gave Safeway and Whole Foods top rankings.

The Seattle Aquarium, a partner in the Seafood Watch project, lists more than a dozen Seattle

restaurants (seattleaquarium.org/visitor-tips) participating in that program.

Q: Why is traditional commercial fishing not sustainable?

A: Fishermen often catch large quantities of fish and other marine life unintentionally. Known as "bycatch," this makes up as much as 25 percent of the total catch. Overfishing, another major problem, occurs when fish are caught faster than they can repopulate. Habitat destruction also takes place frequently, such as when heavy nets get dragged over a large area of the seafloor.

Q: What's an example of sustainable measures taken by fishermen regionally?

A: Northwest fishermen catching bottom-dwelling fish such as black cod and rockfish have recently made great strides reducing bycatch through a new catch-share allocation system.

Q: Are wild fisheries always more sustainable than farm-raised fish?

A: Not necessarily. Several types of fish farmed in the U.S. are featured on sustainable seafood lists, including abalone, rainbow trout and tilapia.

Q: What about sushi?

A: Raw fish used in sushi can be just as sustainable as other seafood, although the names used for different types of sushi get confusing. The Seafood Watch program includes a guide specifically for sushi at seati.ms/QoO1qC.

Q: How can consumers support sustainable seafood?

A: Buy sustainable fish, caught on the West Coast if possible. Consider buying fish directly from the fishermen who caught it, at farmers markets for instance. Use sustainable seafood guides and keep up with their frequent updates. Expand your seafood consumption beyond the usual suspects such as salmon and tuna, to reduce pressure on fisheries. Support regulations to curb industrial pollution, since chemical contamination of fishing grounds is a persistent problem.

Q: Where can I learn more about sustainable seafood, especially what to do with it when I get it home?

A: Seattle-based chef Becky Selengut's 2011 book "Good Fish" offers 75 recipes for sustainable seafood, along with excellent tips on selection and preparation.

As with global warming, some environmental advocates fear that humans have done so much destruction to fisheries worldwide that the Earth may never recover. But the success of recent sustainable seafood efforts should give us hope. If we're going to swim instead of sink, there's no better place to start than the Northwest.

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