

Column of Sept 17, 2013. Editor's Headline: "Ocean is Being Bled Dry"

Regular dining with Asian friends developed my love for sushi and sashimi some fifteen years ago. More recently, on travels in Japan and China, that culinary gusto was reaffirmed: the dishes were to die for that my friends served up. Since then, however, I've wondered about the sea creatures we consume. How do they die, and in what numbers? Do our appetites spell a demise that amounts to large-scale destruction of oceanic life, in ways we can't begin to justify? Are the oceans subjected to the land-equivalent of Big Coal feckless mountain-top removal?

I found answers to these questions soon enough. Sadly, the oceans are dying. And if the oceans die, so do we. Life, including human life, began in the water. The human body is mostly water. The ocean is part of our story, and the story connects us all.

In the last fifty years, commercial fishing has engaged ocean-looting of unimaginable magnitudes. Consequently, 90 percent of the biggest fish have disappeared, and every fishery is in a state of collapse. Fishing that once sustained villagers who pulled nets behind small boats has given way to an armada of factory ships. Trawlers drag nets across the bottom of the ocean, scraping and flattening everything in its path. Their hundreds of tons of catch come at the expense of huge discards: forty percent of all the plunder is discarded as by-catch, tossed overboard dead. "I have witnessed kingdoms of corals—some more than a thousand years old—and magnificent gardens of fish and invertebrates obliterated by a single pass of a trawl net," writes deep-sea biologist Edith A. Widder.

Carl Safina of Long Island, NY, was an impassioned angler. He describes sports fishing for Bluefin in 1985, from a friend's small boat, surrounded by the majestic fish. Could there really be that many tuna here, they asked each other. Yes, there could. That's where the tuna lived, they concluded.

A year later, Japanese buyers arrived at the docks of his town. The globalized market hit home, and it "ate our ocean empty." Now, the great tuna runs are a thing of the past—and Safina has lost his appetite for killing.

In the Mediterranean, schools of half-grown Bluefins are towed in floating pens to marine corrals, to be fattened until they can be killed and shipped to Japan. Needless to say, the practice has decimated the Bluefin breeding population; it's estimated that, by 2014, this "ocean ranger, the wildest, fastest, most powerful fish in the sea," will have disappeared from the world's oceans.

Certain fisheries plunder the oceans not for human consumption but to provide fishmeal for chickens and hogs. Then there's ocean acidification, pollution, and dead zones.

Captain Paul Watson and his Sea Shepherds are determined to save whales and dolphins from illegal hunting in sanctuaries by the Japanese, creatures that are the most intelligent, sentient, and self-aware beings on the planet. Sea Shepherds disrupt the hunts in hopes to make them commercially unproductive. Even this, however, "may not save them from an overall marine ecological collapse." Watson has been called a terrorist, but "In a world in which the Chinese

government can label the Dalai Lama a terrorist, I have no problem with Japanese whalers calling me the same.” Though whaling is illegal, the Japanese government turns a blind eye—and Japanese traditions of not opposing the government (or even corporate interests) makes it a waste of time, in Watson’s view, to try to educate the Japanese. “Besides, it smacks of cultural chauvinism.” Instead, Watson and his crew seek to ensure that the profits of whaling and dolphin-killing is diminished. “The language of profits and losses” is the only one by which Big Business abides.

In this spirit, since 2010, Sea Shepherd has coordinated the Cove Guardian dolphin defense campaign, documenting and exposing the dolphin-killing activities in the Japanese coastal town of Taiji. Volunteers from all around the world travel to Japan at their own expense to witness the brutality and ill fate bestowed upon these highly intelligent mammals, who are either butchered for their meat (which is laden with toxic levels of mercury), or sent to a dolphinarium for shortened and pain-driven lifespans in captivity.

Taiji is “ground zero” for the international trade in live dolphins. There’s big money in the captive-dolphin entertainment industry. A direct link exists between this industry and the bloody waters of the Cove of Taiji.

The Sea Shepherd website describes the final ocean-day one such creature: In the early hours of a cool morning, the dolphin was pulled from the Taiji Harbor sea pens, hoisted in a sling attached to a crane, and then transported in a truck to a captive facility. After the shock of capture and the terror of witnessing the slaughter of an entire pod, this dolphin now suffers the pressure of gravity and the stress of being surrounded by noisy machinery and people. For dolphins pulled from their families and sold into captivity, life is beyond horrible. Yet this pain and suffering wouldn’t exist “if captive facilities were not popular and the demand for live dolphins did not exist.”

Since it’s now illegal in the United States to import dolphins caught in the wild, there’s a big business in captive-bred dolphins. We suspect that many so-called captive bred dolphins imported into the U.S. each year are actually wild-caught.

Dolphins born in captivity exist in prison-like conditions. Supporting a live dolphin show or participating in confined swim-with-dolphin programs anywhere in the world is the same as slicing open a dolphin in Taiji, Sea Shepherd warns. The dolphin entertainment industry drives the hunt, with the killing of the dolphins in its wake. Even well-intentioned marine mammal trainers, even the dolphin-viewing public, have the blood of innocent dolphins on their hands.

I’ve lost my taste for sushi, and I’ll never take grandchildren to a show of trained dolphins—or orcas, or manatees in human-made habitat. I need to go further, I know. Where does one start?