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Something's fishy

By **Michelle Portman**/Special To The Tab
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You might want to get a membership to the New England Aquarium. There are fish there that chances are you'll never see in the wild. Not because they thrive in habitats far away, in exotic places and tropical climes, but because people have fished them to death. Another place you might be able to see these fish is served on a plate garnished with spices, herbs and lemon juice at dozens of popular restaurants. How is it that the fish we love to dine on are dead in the water (seas), yet always available for the right price at our neighborhood eatery?

It is clear that for at least the past decade, fisheries, especially those in New England, have been plagued by tragedy and controversy. Many commercial fish populations, such as cod, flounder and Atlantic salmon, have been culled to such an extent that it is questionable whether they will ever recovery.

Government has tried to step in with policies and regulations aimed at stabilizing and recovering fisheries. Ten years ago, the federal Magnuson-Stevens Fisheries Act, also called the Sustainable Fisheries Act (SFA), was signed into law. It resulted in a myriad of measures to regulate fishing activities- quotas by species, size limits, gear restrictions, seasonal fishing ground closures, etc. Yet these measures are controversial because of their effects on fishermen, the fishing industry and overall marine biodiversity.

A recent national report on ocean policy, funded by the Pew Trust, takes issue with policies promulgated by regional Fisheries Management Councils (8 in number). Too often, council decisions have emphasized short-term commodity production, i.e., focusing on maximizing catch, revenues and employment rather than sustaining natural systems that support wild fish populations and healthy ecosystems. Overall, they rely on scientific uncertainty to justify risk-prone management decisions rather than apply a precautionary approach. Particularly problematic are the adoption of short-sighted single species management techniques that neglect long-term goals for fisheries and ecosystems.

With all the threats to fish - loss of habitat, overfishing, declining ocean water quality and ineffective regulation - how is it that we are finding plenty of fish on the menu of our favorite restaurants? For the most part the answer is: aquaculture.

There are many different modes of aquaculture - for shell fish, for freshwater fish and seafood - making it difficult to generalize regarding its impacts. For most off-shore cultivation, thousands of fish live their short lives in crowded cages sunk below the surface in deep ocean waters. Negative effects involve the concentration of their waste products that causes eutrophication (nutrient overload) in surrounding waters. Also the density at which the fish are kept make them more susceptible to disease and parasites. (To sea lice, for example, a fish farm is an all-you-can-eat buffet.)

Pesticides and antibiotics given to the fish soon find their way into the environment with deleterious impacts on marine water quality and habitat.

These substances don't make "farmed fish" any more healthy for the human consumer either. A recent news article on farmed fish in the UK, called Scottish farmed salmon "the most contaminated product on the supermarket shelves".

Another problem is that of escapees. Farm-hatched fish can escape into the wild and dilute the gene pool of healthier, "smarter" wild specimens, potentially impacting the capability of some species to spawn properly, to grow to adulthood and to be resistant to certain parasites and disease.

This past April, the U.S. Senate heard testimony on offshore aquaculture. A bill backed by the Bush administration is being debated that would expand, support and regulate large-scale fish farming in American coastal waters. Supporters argue fish farms would enhance fish production and reduce seasonal variations in availability. Opponents worry they would add cut-rate competition against existing ocean fishers, flooding the market with low-quality, low-price fish.

These debates leave the average fish-lover wondering whether off-shore and deep-sea cages are a sensible alternative to wisely managing our culling of wild ocean fish. Arguably, the solution lies with the consumer. People can refrain from eating species that are threatened. They can create a demand for certain products raised or fished sustainably. Many folks want to do the right thing when buying or ordering fish, but don't know how. Certainly, the different ways fish are raised and/or caught makes things confusing.

A full discussion of the most environmentally-friendly fish to consume is beyond the scope of this article, but why re-invent the wheel? When I buy fish at the market or order in a restaurant, I consult my Seafood Watch guide. This is a little folding card that I carry in my wallet. It is published by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. Regional and national pocket-sized guides can be downloaded from their Internet site: www.mbayaq.org/cr/seafoodwatch.asp. There is plenty of information on this site about how to be a wise fish consumer and plenty more on what's happening to fisheries and fish.

Remember, despite what we see on our menus, all is not well with our regional and global fisheries. For the sake of fish, and our appetites, precaution is advised.

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