



low-impact seafood



what is it?

First, by seafood we mean fish, cephalopods (squid, octopus), decapods (crabs, lobsters, prawns), plus shellfish. In this intro we're talking more about buying seafood, but we also cover fishing and coastal foraging. Currently, around half the seafood the world eats is caught, and about half is from aquaculture (farming).

Seafood can be very sustainable, but it depends on how it's harvested. Take mussels – they can be harvested from the wild or farmed, and if farmed, they don't need to be fed. They filter food from seawater; farms form reefs that draw in other marine wildlife, and they sequester carbon in their shells. Some vegans even make an exception for shellfish. At the other end of the spectrum there's intensive farming that involves a lot of feed, chemicals and destruction of habitat.

When it comes to wild fish, sustainability is about how healthy the stock of a species is. For example, mackerel – stocks are healthy, it breeds and grows quickly and bounces back from shocks easily. It's a pelagic fish (lives in mid-water), so can be caught with nets or lines, without trawling the bottom. By-catch is low – i.e. you don't tend to accidentally catch other species. At the other end of the spectrum are large beam trawlers or dredgers that scour the sea bed and damage marine habitat and ecosystems.

Humans have always fished, but it's only recently, with industrial-scale fishing, that it's become a problem. It's difficult to get a snapshot of how the seas used to be, compared to now, but old catch records and anecdotal evidence seem to indicate that stocks have been badly damaged, in some cases irreversibly. The collapse of Cod in the Grand Banks of the North Atlantic due to overfishing is perhaps the most famous example. It was the first wake-up call for fishery scientists.

97% of global fish stocks are either overfished or fished to maximum capacity, and we have to feed another few billion people who are due to turn up this century. But in some ways, things are getting better. Awareness of the problems has increased, and consumers are more concerned about what they eat, but the oceans are so huge, and their ecosystems so complex, that it's difficult to get a true picture. There's not much scope for catching more and more wild fish, which is why we're seeing aquaculture grow (it's currently the fastest growing sector in food), and over the last 30 years, aquaculture has become more sustainable because of organisations like the Marine Conservation Society and others working with the industry to reduce the amount of wild fish fed to stock, chemicals and drugs used etc.



Langoustines look like shrimps that are trying hard to be lobsters, and can be caught sustainably in pots or 'creels'; however, they can also be called 'scampi', that are caught by large-scale trawlers that scour the sea bed – best avoided.

what are the benefits?

We've seen that low-impact fishing and aquaculture can provide food without damaging marine ecosystems, but it can also benefit coastal communities – socially and economically. This depends a lot on scale. Small, family fishing boats provide autonomous jobs, preserve heritage and help build interesting, vibrant communities, from which profits aren't extracted by giant businesses to pay shareholders elsewhere. The small boats also catch lots of different species that are non-quota, meaning no rules on how many can be caught, so there's less waste. On the whole, they tend to use low-impact methods – hand lines and set nets with buoys and weights (rather than dragging trawl nets across the sea bed), and pots to catch crabs and lobsters etc.

The inshore, small fishing fleet (called the 'under-10-metre' fleet) comprises 80% of the UK fleet and provides 50% of fishing-related jobs, but has been allocated less than 4% of the overall quota of fish caught. It's another example of the state disadvantaging small businesses – something we'll blog about more over time.

If we can manage the oceans sustainably, they can provide us with a renewable source of food in perpetuity, from thriving coastal communities.

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There's a viable small-scale, sustainable fishing industry based on small 'day boats' around the coast of the UK.

what can I do?

The Marine Conservation Society's Good Fish Guide is a great first port of call. It takes complicated scientific information and boils it down to an easy-to-use traffic light system. If you're buying a particular fish in a fishmongers or a restaurant, it will tell you whether it's a good choice in terms of sustainability.

You can also eat a range of different species. In the UK, 80% of the seafood we eat is from just 5 species – cod, haddock, salmon, tuna and prawns. This means that many species that are caught are difficult to sell, are often thrown back dead into the sea. Salmon and prawns are generally farmed, and around a third of all fish caught in the world are fed to farmed fish (most are Peruvian anchovies, which are very productive – but generally, we should be eating the fish we catch, not feeding them to bigger fish). You could develop a taste for shellfish – among the most sustainable of all foods. You can eat sustainably and have culinary adventures at the same time.

The Marine Conservation Society gave us a 'magic' mnemonic for remembering their top tips:

- M: mix it up (try different species) - you'll learn a lot and have more interesting meals.
- A: avoid the 'red' rated items – the most endangered or least sustainably obtained.
- G: use the Good Fish Guide.
- I: impact – think about how your seafood is caught; let's not fund the trawlers.
- C: check for eco-labels – the Marine Stewardship Council's 'blue tick' or their sister organisation the Aquaculture Stewardship

Council's labels for farmed seafood; they normally only apply to larger-scale fisheries, so if something doesn't have an eco-label, it doesn't necessarily mean it's not sustainable.

When it comes to fish and chip shops, they often source their fish from Norway or Iceland – sources that are usually reasonably sustainable. Many chip shops also have MSC Chain of Custody certification, showing that every link in the supply chain to the shop was sustainable. The most damaging thing you can get from a chip shop or restaurant is probably scampi – usually caught by bottom trawlers. They can be caught sustainably in lobster pots, in which case they're called 'langoustine', and are more expensive.

The most sustainable way to obtain seafood is almost definitely to catch it yourself; and if you're concerned with the economic and social benefits to communities of small-scale fishing, you can support them by purchasing from distributors that we highlight in our directory. You could even try to join them – there's training and sometimes grants available. You're not going to get rich with a small fishing boat – it's more about preferring an outdoor lifestyle close to the sea.

resources

- see lowimpact.org/seafood for more info, courses, links & books, including:
- Josh Niland, *the Whole Fish Cookbook*
- Charlie White, *Living off the Sea*
- Callum Roberts, *the Unnatural History of the Sea*
- goodfishguide.org – the Good Fish Guide
- mcsuk.org – Marine Conservation Society
- msc.org - Marine Stewardship Council



Mackerel are plentiful, breed quickly and easily, they're very good for you, and you can buy them or catch them yourself.

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