

Food Fishes: by Maui Ocean Center Volunteer Pam Daoust

For as long as humans have walked the earth, they have looked to the sea for sustenance. Once considered an almost endless source of high quality protein, the ocean is fast becoming depleted of the most popular food fishes, along with many other species caught unintentionally as by-catch. Studies conducted by the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization show that one in four fishes caught in pursuit of food fishes — or 25 percent — is tossed back into the sea, either dead or dying, because it has no value in the marketplace or is too small to be sold.

The tragic loss of juvenile food fishes rivals the loss of “unwanted” species such as turtles, seals, birds and whales who become fatally entangled in fishing gear. Unwanted “babies” could have replenished fish stocks that are severely stressed due to over-fishing and/or damaging methods of catching fish.

Fisheries around the world have collapsed from destructive past practices. Many fish such as New England cod and bluefin tuna that folks relished years ago are no longer available for their grandchildren to enjoy.

So what can consumers do to ensure that the seafood we love to see on our plates comes from a sustainable source and does not compromise our health due to high levels of human-caused contaminants such as mercury?

We can become educated. Just as Hawaiians of old took time to learn about and respect the marine environment, then set rules to protect and ensure that the ocean’s bounty could be harvested and enjoyed for generations to come, so must we.

Residents of today’s Hawaii can obey fishing regulations already in place, help review and revise them as needed, and choose to eat only seafood that is caught by sustainable methods or raised in “healthy” farms. We can refuse to consume imperiled species or those caught in ways that cause too many other species to be wasted. We can restrict our

consumption of large game species whose flesh contains dangerous quantities of mercury. We can protect our near shore reefs — the ocean’s nursery — from the consequences of coastal development: chemical runoff, sedimentation, too many injection wells, dumping of trash and cigarette butts, and careless folks stepping on coral.

If we love to eat sushi but spare little effort to protecting our irreplaceable reefs, we are behaving at cross-purposes and must accept the fact that sushi may one day disappear from our menus.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium’s Seafood Watch program provides a Seafood Guide for Hawaii that identifies “Best Choices” for seafood consumption and also lists “Good Alternatives” and species to “Avoid.” Guides for different areas, including Hawaii, are updated twice yearly. They are available at many aquariums, including the Maui Ocean Center and can be downloaded from www.mybayaq.org/cr/SeafoodWatch.asp.

Among the best choices in 2008 are aku (skipjack tuna) and akule (bigeye scad) caught by trolling, pole fishing or handline only. Opelu (mackerel scad) and farmed mussels, clams, scallops, striped bass, tilapia and oysters are also sustainable, healthy choices.

Good alternatives include ahi (bigeye tuna) but only if caught by one of the three methods above, and even then, it should be eaten sparingly because of high mercury content. Ono (wahoo), opah (moonfish) monchong, and opakapaka (pink snapper) from the Northwest Hawaiian Islands are good, though ono and opah also have mercury concerns. Uku (gray snapper), local mahi mahi and ulua (trevally) are okay, too.

The guide recommends avoiding imported mahi mahi or aku, along with mano (sharkmeat of any kind), orange roughy, farmed salmon, and Atlantic cod. Pass on onaga (ruby snapper) and opakapaka taken from the main Hawaiian Islands. Swordfish and marlin typically have high mercury content and should be eaten sparingly, if at all. If you don’t know how and where something was caught, the best choice is to choose something else. Consumer preferences ultimately drive the marketplace.

The following wild fisheries have been certified sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council and occasionally show up in local stores: Pacific halibut and wild Alaskan pollock and salmon.

Spurred by public opinion, longline fisheries are beginning to find ways to limit the devastation they cause. Consumers lobbied for and won increased use of “dolphin-safe” methods for catching tuna, for example, though the tuna industry still negatively impacts other species. Fishermen in New England now use electronic “pingers” to warn porpoises and whales away from their nets, and many longliners now fish at night to keep from luring albatrosses and other seabirds to their demise. Bottom trawling and dragging for shrimp, clams, and oysters persist, however, and continue to destroy reefs — which is why healthy farmed varieties are a much better consumer alternative.

We can and must do our part to ensure that the world’s oceans do not become lifeless watery deserts, incapable of feeding us. Ancient Hawaiians practiced sustainable fishing and aquaculture; now, it’s our turn.