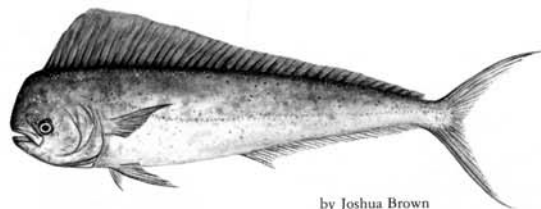


## EcoFish, Inc. Trolls the Waters of Consumer Conscience



by Joshua Brown

*The cod fishery...and probably all the great sea fisheries, are inexhaustible; that is to say, that nothing we do seriously affects the number of the fish.*

THOMAS HUXLEY, Inaugural Address, Fisheries Exhibition, London, 1883



mahimahi and Dungeness crab, watercolor by Todd Terlander

**I**N 1895, A LONGLINE FISHERMAN off the coast of Massachusetts hauled in a cod over six feet long, weighing 211 pounds. A record breaker but not much different from the 50 and 100 pounders that were often pulled up from Georges Bank and the Gulf of Maine in the nineteenth century. Yet those halcyon days when hundreds of schooners heavy with cod set anchor in Gloucester and New Bedford were, really, closing chapters in a 500-year harvesting free-for-all.

Today, Atlantic cod (*Gadus morhua*) average less than 10 pounds, as a commercial species they are nearly extinct, and large parts of the fishery appear to be at the edge of permanent ecological collapse. Cod are not the only Atlantic species in deep trouble. Haddock, salmon, halibut, pollock, flounder, red snap-

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per, most shrimp, and many other American dinner-table favorites have received a red designation from the National Audubon Society's Living Oceans Program for having "significant problems" (see sidebar). Recent research makes clear that "even seemingly gloomy estimates of the global percentage of fish stocks that are overfished are almost certainly too low" (Jackson et al. 2001). Thomas Huxley was wrong.

SO WHAT'S a grocery shopper to do? One reasonable response is to stop buying fish. No fish market, no overfishing. But the sea lanes of self-denial have remarkably little traffic—and there may be another answer: let EcoFish, Inc. be your guide. "Many

people don't know which species are in trouble or how they were caught," explains Henry Lovejoy, president and founder of this Portsmouth, New Hampshire company. "We've done this homework for you. Our goal is to provide high-quality seafood from sustainable fisheries to those consumers in this country that care, which is a rapidly growing group."

More than 1,000 natural food stores in the United States now carry EcoFish. Inside quick-frozen vacuum-sealed packages, you will find one of seven seafoods: Newfoundland shrimp harvested with cone-shaped nets that produce little bycatch (the incidental capture of other species) and none of the pollution of farm-raised shrimp; Chinese scallops raised in

### Seafood Lover's Almanac

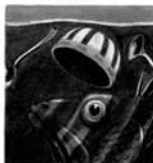
Usually, I don't take my books into the grocery store, but the *Seafood Lover's Almanac* sometimes makes the trip. This elegant volume mixes buyer's guide, natural history, cookbook, nutrition column, and ecological status report about dozens of marine creatures that people like to eat.

Opening to the "Comrades in Armor" chapter, it is clear that not all shellfish are harvested equal. Consider the entry on oysters. Along the outer margin of the page is a graded strip of color, like a piece of litmus paper. Japanese Pacific, European, and Olympia oysters are placed in the green zone at the top; accompanying text explains that they are well managed with abundant habitat. American oysters fall in the middle yellow zone; they are depleted and hampered by water pollution—but are making a comeback in some locations. Dredged oysters find themselves at the bottom, in the red; their harvest causes massive underwater damage. Peering at the mute, glittering trays in the seafood department, it can be hard to know what to choose, what to avoid; this Fish Scale is my guide.

Flipping the page, I learn that, in the wild, one oyster creates a microecosystem in itself: "other shellfish, mud worms, barnacles, boring sponges, snails, hydroids, sea squirts, and numerous other creatures live among, on, and even inside oysters." A sidebar, "How They're Caught," explains that in the Chesapeake Bay, the days of tong and rake harvesting were easier on oyster populations, but have been mostly replaced by destructive dredges. "On Eating Them" describes how to read oyster shells to distinguish dredged from net-grown varieties. Another box tells me that three ounces of

### Seafood Lover's Almanac

NATIONAL AUDUBON SOCIETY



MANUEL LEE, Editor  
Contributors: Suzanne Ledwith and Carl Tabata

oyster contain 100 calories, 35 grams of fat, and 45% of one's daily iron requirement. A cartoon of an oyster carrying a "be my valentine" balloon introduces a tiny essay that demurs on the question of oysters' efficacy as an aphrodisiac—but does warn people with compromised health to avoid eating raw oysters. Returning home, the final page of the oyster section rewards with a recipe for Brazilian bouillabaisse.

The National Audubon Society's Living Oceans Program has distilled an ocean's worth of research into the *Seafood Lover's Almanac*. Fortunately, they have presented it with such flair, pleasing page design, and delicious artwork that more than just committed conservationists can be seen carrying this book in their shopping carts. —Joshua Brown

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open-ocean lantern nets suspended in the water column to avoid the habitat devastation caused by bottom trawling; Manzaney Bay squid, cut into calamari rings—short-lived, fast-growing, early to mature, year-round breeders taken at night with bright lights and seine nets to minimize bycatch; Pacific halibut from the still-thriving Alaskan long-line fishery, which has a strict quota system (Pacific halibut, like many Pacific fishes, are in far better shape than their Atlantic brethren); wild Alaskan coho salmon caught on trolling lines from what appear to be still healthy stocks of fish (unlike most of the ecologically disastrous farmed salmon sold in the U.S.); albacore tuna from the abundant west coast troll fishery that avoids dolphin bycatch; and Ecuadorian mahimahi mostly caught by villagers in canoes with hook-and-line.

From among the hundreds of seafoods available worldwide, these few pass muster with the EcoFish Seafood Advisory Board. "Our advisors are independent of the company," Lovejoy notes. "They volunteer their time because they believe that EcoFish is a business model that really can bring change." With six members ranging from the director of conservation for the New England Aquarium to a marine scientist with the World Wildlife Fund, the board provides expert advice on fish populations, government management plans, harvesting methods, and other measures of a fishery's health.

Lovejoy then goes out and buys the approved products directly from fishermen—avoiding the traditional seven layers of distribution in the seafood market. "In Alaska many of the boats we buy off of are family fishing boats—mom, dad, kids, working hook-and-line—usually no more than 12 lures in the water, brought in by hand," Lovejoy remarked. "It's sad how the global glut of cheap farm salmon has driven many of these hard-working families out of business." EcoFish's streamlined business model allows the company to pay more than other buyers in the Alaskan salmon fishery with a goal of supporting not only a healthy fishery, but also traditional fishing communities.

Lovejoy knows the messy entrails of industrial fishing. Having spent 10 years exporting lobsters before starting EcoFish, he has often traveled overseas to the largest seafood markets in the world. "You still see huge volumes of highly threatened fish, like the bluefin tuna, coming off the coast here in New England and flying into Tokyo," he said. "Every day, warehouses full of bluefin tuna are for sale. A lot of them are very small, the size of a football. As soon as you start

removing breeding stock from a fishery that is already threatened, the writing is on the wall."

As part of its effort to rewrite this sad tale, EcoFish has committed 25% of its profits to marine conservation, as an investment in communities and organizations that support sustainable fishing. This commitment may soon yield real money: 2002 will be the first year (after only two years in business) the four-person company shows a profit, growing from \$1 million in sales in 2001 to \$2 million last year. While Lovejoy would like to be doing \$50 million in annual sales in 5 to 10 years, he gets most excited about how his little business might be used to shape public policy. "Through our product, we can make a large impact in educating the public about the need for MPAs [marine protected areas]. We can put a postcard to Congress in every box of fish."

THOMAS HUXLEY'S words may come back as a perverse kind of truth: "nothing we do seriously affects the number of the fish"—because the fish will have been fished to death. For the more than one billion people who depend on seafood as their sole source of protein, the decrease in global catches since the 1980s—despite greater fishing effort—is ominous. Will efforts like EcoFish help to turn the tide of overfished, overcapitalized, and poorly regulated global fishing? The answer would seem to depend on whether Henry Lovejoy is correct that, "ultimately the force for change in marine conservation is the consumer." ☐

Joshua Brown is Wild Earth's assistant editor and a freelance writer. Though he gets seasick just thinking about big boats, he enjoys sailing clam chowder at his dryland home in Burlington, Vermont. ☞ For more information about EcoFish, Inc., visit [www.ecofish.org](http://www.ecofish.org) or call 877-314-3474.

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\* In addition to these seven products, chefs can receive overnight delivery of Oregon Dungeness crab, farm-raised striped bass, Prince Edward Island blue mussels, scallops, and farm-raised rainbow trout. EcoFish has also recently launched a retail program for fresh seafood.

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