

Is sustainable fish a scam, like Netflix documentary 'Seaspiracy' suggests?

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Trout fishing on Opening Day at Lake Merced, May 13, 1952 Photographer Unknown/The Chronicle

Last week, I spread the good word about Sea Forager, [a community-supported fisheries company](#) that has been a balm for me the past year. Besides the high quality of the fish and seafood it delivers, a major part of why I love it is because I know where every fillet comes from, who catches it, and how they do it. After reading that newsletter and watching the Netflix documentary, "[Seaspiracy](#)," a reader came to me with some legitimate concerns about the ethics of eating fish at all. Here's the question:

After watching “Seaspiracy” this weekend, I feel like the only solution to save our oceans is to stop eating fish entirely. I was even going to stop by my beloved [Hook Fish](#) this weekend, but didn't, because of watching that movie. I'm curious how you think about this issue of overfishing and the impact fishing is having on global warming, etc? If you know who's catching the fish, does that make it okay to you?

The documentary, which debuted on the streaming service in late March, lays out myriad problems with the global fishing industry. It shows enormous bottom trawling nets destroying kelp forests and coral reefs, thus worsening the effects of climate change. And it presents fish farms as cesspools of filth and disease, producing salmon that must be artificially dyed to generate its characteristic pink flesh. On top of that, it piles on footage of whales and dolphins being mercilessly slaughtered by Japanese and Norwegian fishermen and enslaved workers testifying to inhumane conditions on Thai fishing boats. It argues that the only way to save the oceans is for humans to stop eating fish entirely.

I watched the documentary last week, and I was impressed with how effectively it layered images of despair and horror to erode viewers' sense of hope. The solution that the documentary presented — “stop eating fish” — felt so simple, but from my experiences as a chef sourcing sustainable fish and living in coastal regions of the continent where fish and seafood are a central part of everyday life, I sensed that the answer was much more complicated. So I called up a few experts from different industries and asked them, “Is there an ethical way to eat fish?”

According to Jennifer Bushman, a strategic development consultant focused on sustainable aquaculture, there's plenty of room for optimism here. The problems highlighted in the documentary, such as the issue of farm-raised fish requiring massive amounts of smaller fish to eat, are ones that many people in the sustainable fish world have been actively working on for years, she said. She noted that while it's impossible to give a blanket statement on the sustainability of fish in general, science-based resources like the [Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch](#) list are extremely trustworthy if you [know where the product is from](#) and how it was caught.

It's all about getting into specifics, said Bob Partrite, the COO of Simco Restaurants, which owns [Fog Harbor Fish House](#) on San Francisco's Pier 39. For example, when we say “cattle farm,” the term could mean free-range operations like Stemple Creek Ranch, or it could mean industrial factory farms that pack tens of thousands of cattle into compact spaces. The type of aquaculture shown in the film, with salmon infested with parasites and creating massive amounts of waste in the surrounding marine environment, isn't true of every fish farm.

One of Partrite's favorites is [McFarland Springs trout](#), farmed in Susanville, Calif. with a vegetarian diet, no antibiotics and an environmentally friendly waste disposal system. Regardless of whether fish is farmed or wild-caught, you should try to support companies that are proud to talk about what goes on behind the scenes, he said.

Transparency is key to [Red Boat](#), a premium Vietnamese fish sauce company based on the island of Phu Quoc. “Fish sauce has been produced in Phu Quoc for hundreds of years,” said Red Boat founder Cuong Pham, and so the local fishermen have refined a process for ensuring that they’ll be able to catch big, healthy anchovies for hundreds of years to come. By minimizing Red Boat’s supply chain, the company can more easily keep an eye on its impact on the sea, and on whether the workers are being treated well.

The idea of stopping eating fish entirely isn’t really feasible when you think about communities like Phu Quoc, said Tiffany Pham, Cuong’s daughter and the fish sauce company’s operations director. Like billions of people in coastal or island communities around the world, they depend on the sea to live, both for food and for income. She believes that any solution to ocean depletion must factor in the well-being of people like them, too.

Writer Layla Schlack, who recently wrote a piece on the [sustainability of tinned fish](#), noted that many of the bad parts of the global fishing industry are symptoms of system-level problems. “It’s much more prudent and achievable for every single catch limit in world to be reviewed and altered,” she said, to match the ebb and flow of fish populations over time. Actually enforcing those limits worldwide would be essential. And she suggested that government subsidies could be reallocated toward smaller-scale fisheries doing environmentally conscious work, as opposed to industrial food producers.

While Americans generally prefer top-of-the-chain fish like tuna and salmon, diversifying what we eat can also help, said Becca Millstein, CEO and co-founder of [Fishwife](#), a tinned fish company. Farmed bivalves like oysters and mussels, for instance, “are just this amazing public health and sustainability miracle,” she said, because they require no feed and can rehabilitate ecosystems by filtering the water. “Buy species you’ve never tried before,” she advised.

Bushman sees a model in Americans’ evolving preference for fair trade coffee and cacao, which has prompted major outlets like Costco to exclusively stock fair trade-certified coffee. More than anything, she wants people to know that they have a voice in this that they can and should use. If you’re at a restaurant or grocery store and the staff can’t tell you anything about the fish’s origins, don’t order it. Then politely tell them why, so they can communicate customer demand to their buyers. While the question of marine sustainability does feel complex, simply not ordering fish you can’t identify is comparatively quite simple. Just get the black bean burger instead.