

## A Very Fishy Tale

Many people choose to eat fish rather than land animals because they've been told that fish don't suffer. Certainly those who do a lot of fishing would like to believe that. Quite the opposite, however. Fish are vertebrate creatures with a brain, nervous system and pain receptors throughout their bodies, much like us.<sup>1</sup> Beyond that biological evidence, research by marine scientists is repeatedly proving that fish feel not only pain but also stress and fear.<sup>2</sup> And the methods employed by commercial fishers and fish farmers virtually guarantee suffering.

Animal suffering runs deep under the surface of our waters, with so much suffering in commercial fishing that most people choose not to think about it. Although protective legislation for other animals is weak in most areas of the world, its existence does indicate a general

**Fish are not swimming vegetables. They feel pain just like other animals; like we do. It's only a matter of time before we look upon cruelty to fish in the exact same way we look upon cruelty to dogs and cats.**

— Karin Robertson, Fish Empathy Project

awareness. Nothing of the kind exists for fish, and it's time for that to change.

### World Fishing 101

There are 20,000 species of fish in the world's waters, 9,000 of which are commonly caught through commercial and recreational fishing. Despite the diversity, global fish populations are declining rapidly because the same species continue to be fished until they're gone. Of the world's large predatory fish (tuna, sharks, cod, swordfish, halibut and marlins), 90% have disappeared in the past 50 years.<sup>3</sup> The common skate has already been fished to extinction in the Irish Sea, as has the blue pike in Lake Erie; both species that were once part of important commercial markets. In the Atlantic Ocean, cod, haddock and capelin populations are seriously threatened, as

are some species of salmon, halibut and anchovies in the Pacific.

From 1950 to 1988, global fish production increased from 19 million to 89 million tons annually, even surpassing the increase in beef production (19 million to 54 million tons).<sup>4</sup> In 2001 global fisheries produced 92 million tons of fish,<sup>5</sup> and despite a few localized regulations governing overfishing, it continues at a vastly unsustainable pace.

In 2006 Stanford University in California announced the results of a four-year study on the global collapse of marine ecosystems,



NOAA

warning that at the current rate of depletion, all commercial fish stocks will be eliminated by 2048.<sup>6</sup>

### **Fishing Off-Target**

When anything but the target species of fish is pulled from the sea, it becomes part of the unwanted bycatch, accounting for nearly a quarter of everything harvested. In some instances, such as the Gulf of Mexico's shrimp fishery, it is believed that bycatch outweighs the "profitable" catch by 10 to 1.<sup>7</sup> Usually maimed or dead, the undersized fish, sea birds and marine mammals are thrown overboard where they quickly become food for predators.

### **During the Catch**

There are many ways for fish, and other marine life, to suffer during the catch. Trawl nets routinely crush them, they suffocate out of water and are gutted while still alive. Longline fishing routinely maims fish, birds and mammals when the line, up to 80 miles long and strung with 10,000 hooks, tears through their mouths.

### **A Lost Habitat**

The once-spectacular ocean floor has been scraped and altered dramatically since the advent of modern fishing methods. This has resulted in the loss of habitat for tens of thousands of sea life species. Commercial fishers routinely use drift nets, bottom trawls, and purse seine nets, all of which are responsible for environmental destruction and high quantities of bycatch.

- Fish farming: [www.advocatesforanimals.org.uk/resources/farmed/fish.html](http://www.advocatesforanimals.org.uk/resources/farmed/fish.html)
- All Creatures — Fish: [www.all-creatures.org/anex/fish.html](http://www.all-creatures.org/anex/fish.html)
- Cruelty of fishing: [www.animal-lib.org.au/lists/fish/fish.shtml](http://www.animal-lib.org.au/lists/fish/fish.shtml)
- David Suzuki Foundation: [www.davidsuzuki.org/Oceans](http://www.davidsuzuki.org/Oceans)
- Fishing Hurts: [www.fishinghurts.com](http://www.fishinghurts.com)

## **Messing with Mother Nature**

Profitability, along with the collapse of many commercial fisheries, has led to the creation of fish farms, where fish are kept in confined spaces; reared and slaughtered under the control of humans. These factory farms of the sea have resulted in the spread of disease, sea lice, environmental contamination and suffering of the fish. Sea lice from fish farms on northern Vancouver Island have caused the decline of seven genetically distinct runs of wild salmon,<sup>8</sup> and British Columbia's fish farms discharge the collective raw sewage equivalent of a city of 500,000 people.<sup>9</sup> As well, the farmed fish escape, spreading disease and displacing wild fish. Yet fish farming is big business worldwide, with fish farms accounting for 58% of global salmon consumption. The US leads the world, consuming 228,000 tons of farmed salmon annually,<sup>10</sup> most of which is imported from Chile and Canada.