

If Sea Otters Have to Change Their Diet, Why Don't We?

Most people are able recognize a sea otter when they see one. They are adorable, furry, playful and they are in trouble. You may have heard about the past plights of the sea otter: poaching and habitat degradation. But a new threat faces their fuzzy forms. Science Daily published an article on January 24, 2009 alerting us that a forced change



in their diet, as a result of human activities, has once again put sea otters at risk. Sea otters feed on a variety of marine organisms. They enjoy molluscs and sea urchins, but unfortunately so do we. As we harvest more and more of these creatures, there are fewer of them for the sea otters to munch on. What is the result? Well, when the going gets tough, the tough get foraging! With their food source depleted, sea otters have turned to crabs for their next meal. Sadly sea otters are unaware that crabs play host to a parasitic worm. The worm, *Polymorphus kenti*, lives in the intestine and causes peritonitis, a condition which is lethal to pups and juveniles. This worm mostly affects the groups of sea otters off the coast of California. Our escalating consumption of sea food has increased the prevalence of disease amongst sea otters.

This is not the first time, nor will it be the last, that human activity has disrupted the natural behaviours of our planets creatures. But before you begin to glare at every person that walks out of a sushi bar, lets look to a solution. Enter: Ocean Wise! First implemented in 2005, Ocean Wise is a conservation program run by the Vancouver Aquarium. This program is not only designed to help the ocean's creates survive but to educate consumers (and we really are such ravenous ones) about sustainable seafood. Ocean Wise recognizes knowledge as power, by making sure restaurants and markets have up to date information on seafood. This information helps them make ocean-friendly decisions when purchasing their stock.

So what is “sustainable seafood?” It may sound like an oxymoron, but the Ocean Wise program defines sustainable seafood as a species that is captured or farmed in a manner that takes into consideration its health and stability in the long-term as well as the prosperity of the marine ecosystem it occupies. Ocean Wise recommends species that are abundant and can remain stable when faced with the pressures of fishing.

The Ocean Wise program is concerned about the threats that face marine organisms. Any of us that are alive and conscious in the 21st century can see that there is an ongoing rise of consumption. As a result, we are taking much more than we deserve. Most fish populations are overfished. We, as humans and as industries, are taking more out of the oceans than the remaining adult species can replenish. Bycatch is another major concern. It is easy to imagine sticking your hand into a bag of trail mix and pulling out more that just the raisins. Bycatch occurs when an organism, other than the one you’re intending, gets pulled out of the ocean while you aim for a different species. These animals are often tossed back into the ocean but do not survive their initial extraction. Habitat destruction is Ocean Wise's final concern. The methods by which we take marine species out of the ocean leaves the habitat they live in devastated. This destruction increases the danger for the remaining organisms, as spawning, breeding, nursing and sheltering areas vanish.

In response to this devastation, Ocean Wise has encouraged a number of fishing techniques to help reduce our impact on marine life. The fishing techniques currently in practice, such as trawling, dredging and pelagic long lining, cause high bycatch. Ocean Wise suggests that these techniques can be replaced by trolling, hook and line, pot and traps which reduce bycatch. Most of these techniques also reduce the impact of fishing on the ocean floor. Instead of dragging trawler across the bottom of the ocean, we can use more

passive approaches to ensure that vital habitats are not destroyed.

Ocean Wise is taking a step in the right direction. They are making it simple for the consumer to help conserve marine organisms while taking care of all the dirty work. You can help support them in a way that is both delicious and easy: Just head out for dinner! There is a list of Ocean Wise restaurants on the Vancouver Aquarium's website (www.vanaqua.org). Ocean Wise options are highlighted on the menu at each restaurant. Their logo (see image) signals that this dish is Ocean Wise. They are making it effortless for you to make ocean friendly choices. It is even as convenient as grabbing dinner at our fabulous university! Simon Fraser is part of Ocean Wise's efforts to reduce our ecological foot print.

Supporting a project such as Ocean Wise benefits all marine organisms, including the sea otters. Once we take responsibility for our actions and ensure that our selfishness does not affect other organism's dietary needs or natural way of life, we will be on our way to building a better life for both humans and marine creatures.