

# Joy To The Fishes *and* the Deep Blue Sea

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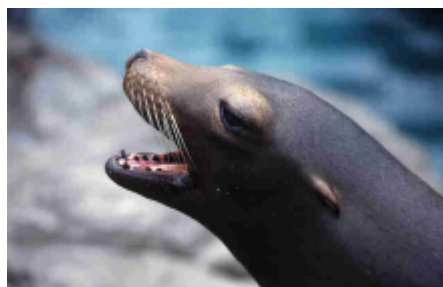
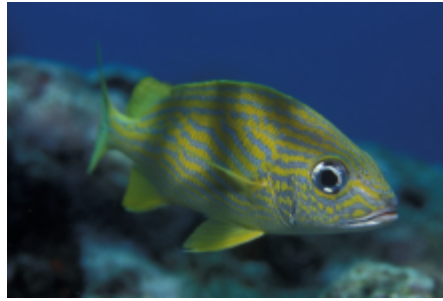
Last week some family members from Minnesota came to visit me here in Boulder, CO. My vegan lifestyle seems to offer them as much infotainment as the colorful, cultural backdrop of Boulder. They are good-hearted people and respect my decision to lead a compassionate life enough to enjoy their vacation as vegetarians... mostly... at least when I was around. "I could be a vegetarian," was the common refrain after an introduction to a delicious new vegetarian food.

While they were here, we went to a local restaurant that had menus with little stars by the items that "may contain contaminants that may cause illness when not cooked to well done." They contained ground beef or fish. Most people seem to pass up beef with its link to heart disease, cancer and other illnesses without much fuss. But fish -- fish is good for you; we've been eating fish forever; it doesn't hurt the environment; and we've been told fish don't feel pain. So it's all good, right? Uh, wrong.

Every year, more than 100,000 Americans get ill from contaminated seafood. According to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), nearly all fish and shellfish now contain traces of mercury. The EPA also warns that more than 600,000 babies will be born this year with increased risk of mercury-related birth defects including permanent neurological disorders and mental retardation. The single biggest source of mercury poisoning is fish consumption.

Forty-four states now have advisories against eating fish due to local contaminants in the waterways. The mercury advisory of the EPA goes on for several pages and advises a limit of X ounces of Y kind of fish for Z body weight and includes a list of fish to avoid. You also consume lead, PCBs and arsenic with each fish you eat.

Even if you can find relatively unpolluted fish, eating them does not promote good health. Some people eat fish hoping to limit fat and cholesterol. But fish have excessive amounts of protein, fat, and cholesterol, and no fiber. For example, salmon flesh is 52 percent fat and, ounce for ounce, shrimp have twice the cholesterol of beef.



In the rush to kill 17 billion fish per year for human consumption in the U.S., there are countless other bystanders killed in the nets and by those trying to secure their profits.

But, wait a minute -- those Omega-3 fatty acids are well worth the risks, right? Wrong. Eating fish for your health is a bit like walking a tightrope five stories above the pavement just because it helps raise your heart rate.

The Omega-3 hoopla was created when studies showed that Inuit people, consumers of vast quantities of fish, had one of the lowest heart attack rates. The problem is that while Omega-3s reduce the rate of heart attacks by thinning the blood, this also causes an increase in strokes and impotence. And their large consumption of animal protein results in the Inuits having one of the highest rates of osteoporosis in the world.

Fish tend to be one of the last animals to leave the plates of would-be vegetarians. Since we aren't able to judge the look in the eyes of fish and they aren't cuddly like puppies, it's easy to forget that they are living, breathing, feeling beings.

It's also important to realize that for every pound of fish you consume, up to 14 pounds of bycatch, the other living animals like whales, dolphins, sea lions, otters, sea turtles, sharks and countless other fish, are killed and then thrown away in the process of collecting your meal.

Factory fish farms are the fastest growing means of "fish production." Nearly 50 percent of salmon and 65 percent of fresh water fish consumed spend their lives in captivity. They are overcrowded and suffer horrible lives and gruesome deaths. The giant fish pens attract tens of thousands of birds and sea lions who are killed to keep them from eating the profits. And while fish farmers like to promote fish farms as an alternative to depleting fish populations, many of the fish they farm are fed ocean fish. It takes five pounds of ocean fish to produce one pound of farmed fish.

Trying to be more environmentally friendly and health conscious, people often ask, "Well then, what fish should I eat?" I'm sorry, but that sounds to me like, "Should I eat my cat or my dog?" You don't need to eat animals to have a delicious meal. Leaving animals out of your diet will make you and the planet healthier. And if you could read the face of a fish, I'm almost sure you'd see her smile.