**Five Ocean Species We're Eating to Death**



**Sea Urchins:** Sea urchins appear to be the lowliest of marine creatures—the painfully prickly echinoderms sit at the bottom of the ocean, feeding on algae far beneath the sea’s majestic swimmers. But there’s one set of landlubbers that can’t get enough of the briny deep’s ugliest residents: Sushi eaters.

Green sea urchin populations have plummeted in North America, thanks in large part to rising demands for uni, a sweet, creamy dish made from sea urchin gonads. As food writer Barry Estabrook [recently noted](http://politicsoftheplate.com/?p=1161), uni’s popularity on sushi bars prompted nearly 3,000 commercial fishermen to take to Maine’s seas in the mid-1990s in search of the delicacy. Diners couldn’t get enough, business boomed, and Maine’s fishermen hauled in nearly 40 million pounds of sea urchin worth about $33 million in 1994 alone.

As Estabrook warns, “never underestimate the power of human appetites to devastate an aquatic resource.” Green sea urchin populations couldn’t keep up with hungry sushi fans. In 2010, Maine’s fishermen brought in just 2.6 million pounds of uni. Though rehabilitation efforts are underway, green sea urchins continue to suffer low population numbers.

The sea urchin’s tale is sad, but familiar. Consumers have taken a serious jab at oceanic ecosystems with their collective knives, forks, spoons, and chopsticks. [According to the Food and Agriculture Organization](http://www.un.org/events/tenstories/06/story.asp?storyID=800), more than 70 percent of global fish species are either fully exploited or depleted. It turns out there just aren’t that many fish in the sea. Here are five more ocean-dwellers we are literally eating to death:

**Bluefin Tuna**: Few fish species rival the power, size, and strength of the mighty bluefin tuna. The [average bluefin](http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/fish/bluefin-tuna/) weighs in at 550 pounds and measures 6.5 feet long. Just one bluefin tuna can fetch more than $100,000. The massive haul is partly why regulatory agencies have failed to put adequate protections in place for the seriously threatened fish—it still hasn’t earned “endangered” status, though most scientists agree it should.

Western Atlantic bluefin tuna populations have declined by 80 percent since the 1970s, when demand and prices for the fish skyrocketed. The eastern stock of Atlantic bluefins hasn’t fared any better—according to the Center for Biological Diversity [[PDF](http://www.biologicaldiversity.org/species/fish/Atlantic_bluefin_tuna/pdfs/BluefinTunaPetition-5-24-2010.pdf)], the population has decreased by 60 percent in the past decade. The culprit? Sushi restaurants again, which prize the succulent swimmer for sashimi and spicy tuna rolls. The bluefin’s fatty underbelly, called *toro*, fetches a particularly high price.

**Sharks**: Soup is the reason so many shark species teeter on the brink of extinction. Shark-fin soup is a traditional Chinese dish served at major events like weddings and banquets to symbolize status and importance. Soup aficionados acquire their main ingredient through "finning," a brutal process in which fisherman catch live sharks, slice off their fins, then throw the animals back into the water to slowly die. About 70 million sharks [[PDF](http://seastewards.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/05/SF-Supe-Invitation.pdf)] are killed through finning every year.

Decimating fish populations is never acceptable, but sharks pose a more complex problem. Sharks are apex predators, the kings of the ocean. They keep other species’ populations in check. When shark populations dip too low—and they have—entire oceanic ecosystems can get thrown dangerously out of whack.

Some cities, states, and even countries are beginning to offer sharks some protections. Hawaii, California, Oregon, Washington, the Bahamas, the Maldives, and several cities across the globe have banned the sale of shark fins. More bans are expected to pass this year, but it’s going to take a lot of legislating to make a tangible dent in overfishing.

**Chilean Sea Bass:** Chefs and consumers alike covet [Chilean sea bass](http://www.good.is/post/watch-your-mouth-sea-bass-my-ass/), otherwise known as Patagonian toothfish, for its rich, buttery flavor. The hearty dish rose in popularity in the 1990s, resulting in overfishing that seriously depleted Chilean sea bass populations by the end of the decade.

Some folks say that Chilean sea bass have rebounded in recent years. One fishery is even certified by the Marine Stewardship Council. But conservationists warn consumers not to start chowing down on Chileans anytime soon. Casson Trenor, a Greenpeace campaigner and author of the book *Sustainable Sushi*, [recently wrote](http://www.alternet.org/food/150407/4_fish_we_should_never_eat/?page=2) that “the very existence of a Chilean sea bass fishery is in itself evidence of an unsustainable fishing paradigm.” As Trenor notes, in order to even locate a “sustainable” Chilean sea bass fishery, fishermen were forced to travel to the waters of Antarctica and drop their hooks to great depth. If fishermen must literally sail to the ends of the earth to locate and haul back even one healthy catch of Chilean sea bass, should we really be eating those fish?

**Orange Roughy**: This flaky, white fish is another swimmer that’s been fished beyond the point of sustainability. Orange roughy’s popularity, combined with its slow growth rate and long lifespan, resulted in population [declines of 80 percent](http://www.scientificamerican.com/article.cfm?id=good-riddance-to-overfishing) between the 1970s and 1990s. Orange roughy can live to be 100 years old. Often, the fish are caught before they’ve had the chance to reproduce.

These are five of the most seriously threatened fish in the oceans, but they’re hardly the only unsustainable options. The Monterey Bay Aquarium, which produces a yearly [“Seafood Watch” guide](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/download.aspx) on environmentally friendly fish options, lists 21 types of fish on its “avoid” list.

And fishing is just one of many threats the oceans face: Climate change, offshore oil drilling, and pollution each create their own set of issues. Fishing itself can wreak havoc on other species, which can get accidentally caught in nets or destroyed by bottom trawlers.

That’s where you come in. With so many complex problems hammering ocean ecosystems, curbing fish consumption is a relatively easy way to put some bounty back in the briny deep. Consumers can wield their knives, forks, and chopsticks for good by following [guides like Seafood Watch](http://www.montereybayaquarium.org/cr/cr_seafoodwatch/download.aspx), which offer region-specific lists of which species boast plentiful populations and which fish are best to keep off the table.

While they’re not eating, diners can also speak for the oceans. California and Toronto recently enacted bans on the sale of shark fins largely due to consumer pressure. The long-term solution to protecting threatened fish species is to put city, state, and federal officials on the hook.