

SOMETHING'S FISHY

October 4, 2022

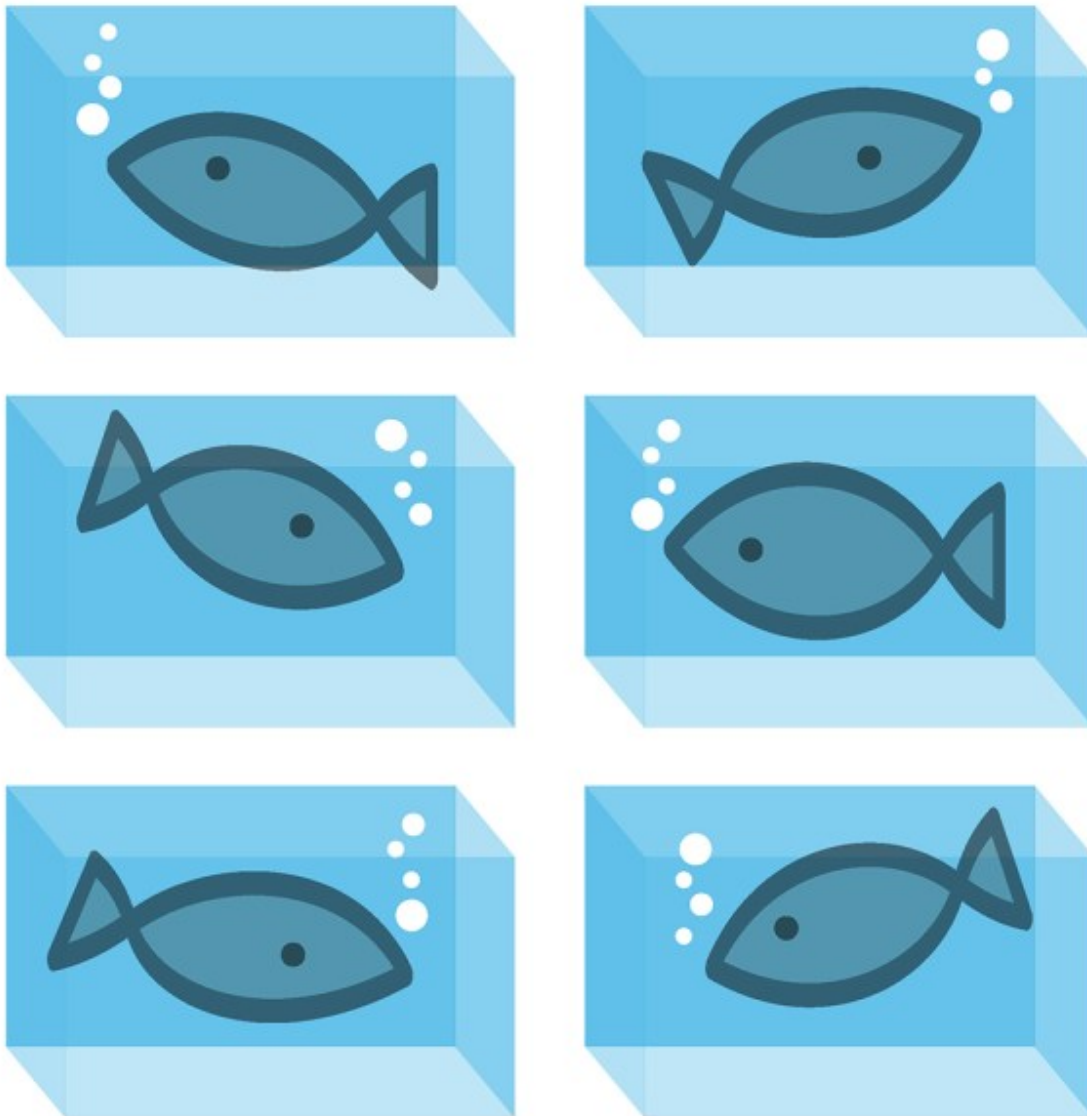


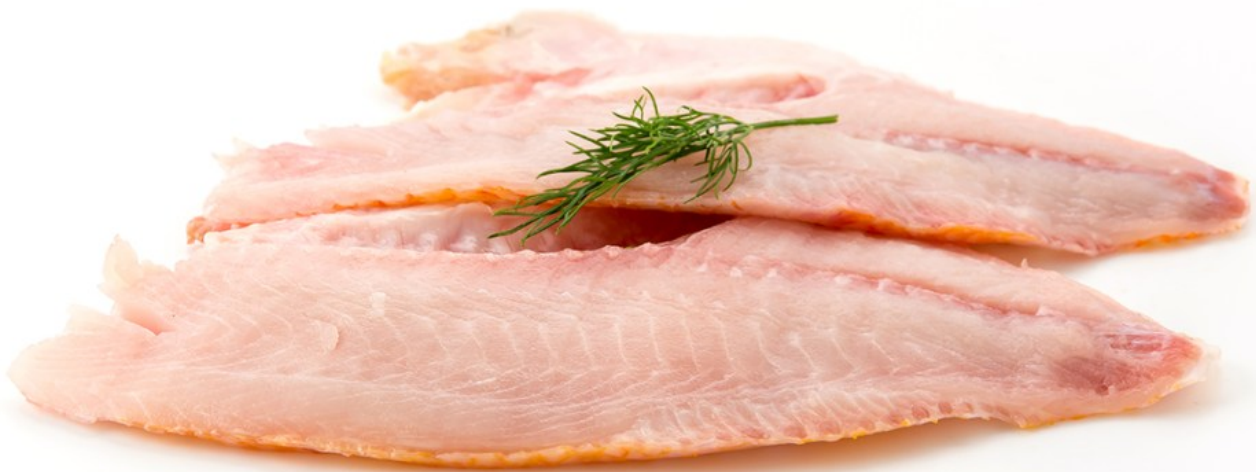
ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

by Liora Fishman

AN OVERVIEW OF THE FISH AT THE COOP

I've never given much thought to where my fish comes from. As you might guess, much of my relationship to fish was established through the comments people would

make about my last name when I was growing up—but that’s basically where it ended. As I child, I would choke down salmon when my mom would serve it, though I eventually grew to love in the form of sushi. But, unlike the thought and care I put into understanding where the meat I purchase comes from (buying organic poultry and so on), the origin of my fish was always an afterthought.



FISH VERSUS MEAT

Perhaps I thought more about meat because the story around its consumption has always been more dire. With documentaries in the mid to late-2000s, like *Food, Inc.*, investigating where most grocery store meat came from, and *Super Size Me* tearing off our rose-colored glasses about McDonald’s, the meat industry’s shortcomings have long been highly publicized. You don’t have to be a vegetarian (I am not, though not

without a bit of guilt) to understand that eating meat is harmful to the environment, and sometimes also to our health.

Yet, in my laziness and impatience when it comes to cooking meat and poultry, I've often found myself turning to quickly-cooked fish like tilapia or flounder for protein. Which has prompted me to ask: Where does my fish come from? And what impact does eating fish have on the environment?

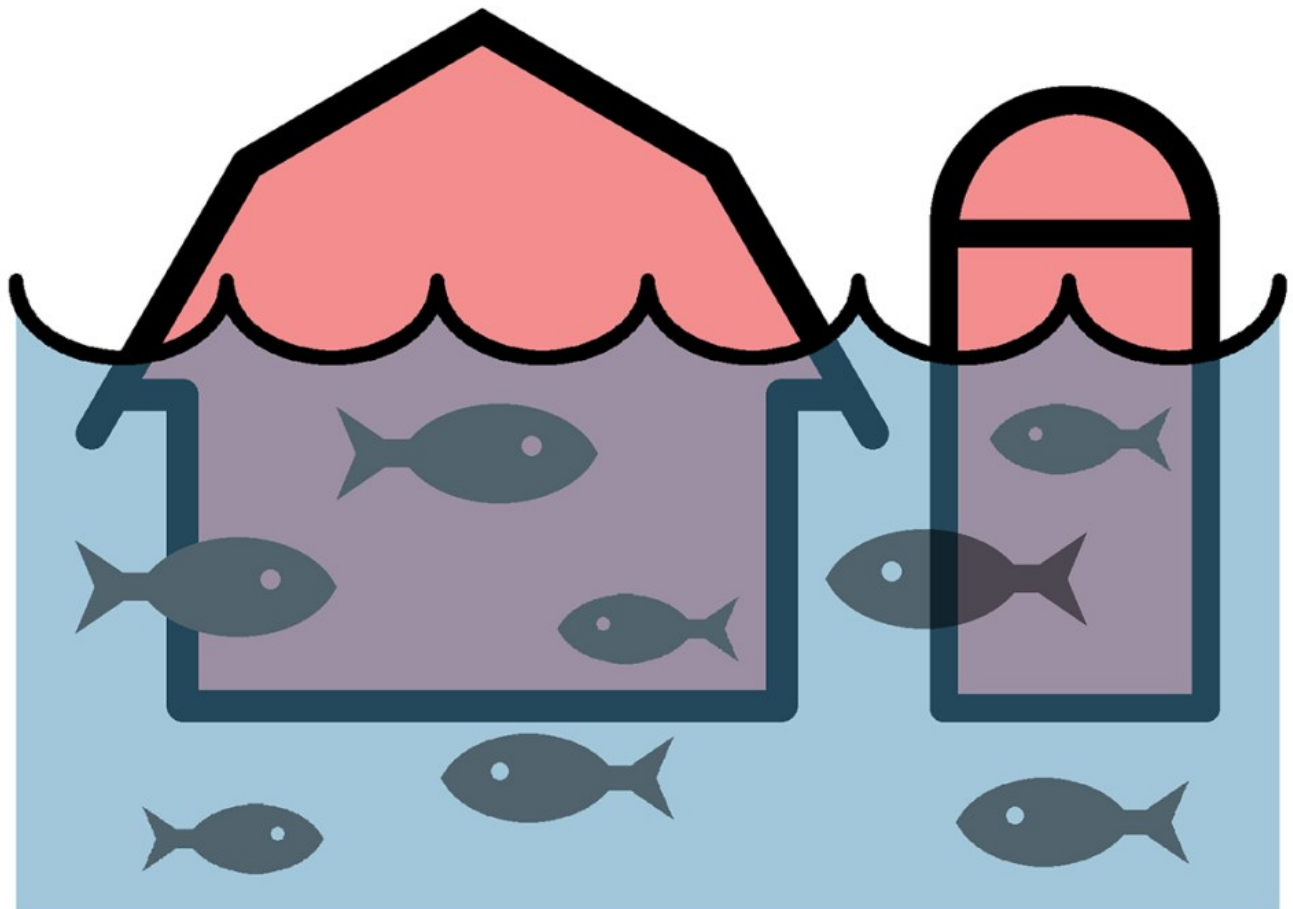


ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

WHERE DOES MY FISH COME FROM? AND WHAT IMPACT DOES EATING FISH HAVE ON THE ENVIRONMENT?

In the last half-century, the global impact of overfishing has tripled. According to the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, “one-third of the world’s assessed fisheries are currently pushed beyond their biological limits.” One of the largest problems of overfishing is “bycatch,” the “unwanted sea life” captured “while fishing for a different species.” According to the World Wildlife Organization, “this, too, is a serious marine threat that causes the needless loss of billions of fish, along with hundreds of thousands of sea turtles and cetaceans.”

The fish we eat is typically caught in the ocean (wild-caught) or raised on a fish farm (farm-raised). Fish farms are often harmful to the marine life they reside among, and are some of the main contributors to bycatch and overfishing in general.

Mariculture, or the cultivation of fish farms within an enclosed section of an ocean, usually employs open-net pens and cages to capture large amounts of fish. This poses threats to the native environment, can lead to outbreaks of disease and can threaten the health of the larger ocean if the managers of the fish farm are not cautious about waste removal. According to the Ocean Futures Society, disease, in particular, poses a threat not just to the cultured animals within the farm but also to the greater, native landscape of the habitat, by introducing “non-native diseases into the environment or facilitating disease through unsanitary conditions in densely packed farmed fish.” There is also the issue of non-native or genetically modified fish possibly escaping and outcompeting native species.



LOOKING AHEAD

Of course, this bleak outlook on marine life puts a damper on the salmon you were looking forward to ordering at your favorite restaurant. As someone who prefers fish to meat and finds little excitement in other forms of protein (sorry tofu), I find the dire situation of the commercial fishing industry particularly alarming. Luckily, there are sustainable alternatives to your Big Fish woes, such as sustainable fish farming or aquaculture.

CLOSED SYSTEMS

Many forward-thinking, sustainably-minded fish farms have turned to walled, closed--container tanks that operate entirely on land. "By separating farmed species from native populations, both systems protect the environment from accidental fish escapes,

limit the spread and transfer of disease and parasites between local and farmed fish and decrease the amount of fish feed and waste excreted into the local ecosystem,” the Ocean Futures Society explains.



ILLUSTRATION BY STEPHEN SAVAGE

SUSTAINABILITY

These closed-container systems also conserve water by not harming perfectly good,

clean ocean water and the habitats living within it. Sustainable fish farms should strive to use as little water space as possible (as many do) and continually monitor the quality of the water to ensure that no harmful pollution is leaking into the ocean as a result of their practices.

Many sustainable fish farms have partnered with scientists to go a step further and develop recirculation systems. These systems are a way for on-land fish farms to—yup, you guessed it—recycle the water they use to further reduce their environmental impact. Columbia University’s Climate School reported that “recirculation systems use 100 times less water per kilo of fish than traditional land-based systems. In addition, the water quality can be monitored continuously, which lessens the risk of disease and the need for antibiotics.”

The demand for fish is simply outpacing the supply we have in our oceans. But with sustainable fish farming, on-land production and water recirculation, there is a hopeful and healthy option in the not-so-distant future for pescatarian and pescatarian-inclined friends alike. Commercial fish farms are beginning to acknowledge the dire state of the situation and adopt more sustainable practices. The remaining question is one we often ask our corporations in the face of the climate crisis: Is it enough? And will it happen quickly enough?

QUESTIONS YOU CAN ASK

In the meantime, we can do our research on our own fish choices at the Coop, spend a few more seconds reading the packaging, or quickly search Google before checking out. If your fish says “farm-raised,” check if that farm is on-land and closed-container or if it resides in the ocean. Individual actions cannot and will never be enough to correct the systemic wrongs committed at a grand, corporate scale, but supporting local, sustainable organizations does give momentum to the growing call for action around ethical, eco-conscious fishing practices.

OUR COOP EXPERT

Charles Parham, one of the Coop staff members who oversees fish buying, says that the Coop uses Monterey Bay Aquarium, in California, as a general guide. “Typically we only consider fish that are in their ‘Good’ or higher categories,” Parham says. “We also prioritize MSC or BAP certification,” meaning that the Coop seeks out fish distributors who fit the the Marine Stewardship Council or Best Aquaculture Practices certification, both of which provide rubrics and standards for fish distributors.

“In general, as with the Coop’s other buying principles, we prioritize sustainable practices,” Parham explains. “We do not require fish to be local or wild, but when a good option comes up, such as Hudson Valley Fisheries, we are excited about it.”

Liora Fishman lives in Prospect Heights. She’s been a Coop member since 2021.