

Fish is great for healthy eating, but shop wisely

Among the top 10 New Year's resolutions each winter is the pledge to shed the few extra pounds gained by indulging in high-calorie treats distinctive of the holiday season. We commit ourselves to eating healthier and exercising more regularly but, alas, we just can't resist those comfort foods.

GUEST COLUMN

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One way to accomplish it is by eating more fish and shellfish – a source of protein often low in saturated fat and cholesterol. Fatty, cold-water fish such as salmon, mackerel and tuna contain two important omega-3 fatty acids, which recent research conducted by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration suggests might reduce the risk of coronary heart disease, a condition that affects 13 million Americans. The American Heart Association recommends two servings of fatty fish per week for optimal omega-3 intake.

Can we eat more fish and shellfish to improve our health without degrading the health of our oceans?

According to a recent report by the U.S. Commission on Ocean Policy, seafood consumption in the United States is on the rise, as the pounds of seafood consumed per individual in a year increased from 12.5 pounds in 1980 to 16.3 pounds in 2003.

While this is good from a human health standpoint, it is less healthy for the fish, since the number of overfished stocks in the world has tripled in the past 30 years. A recent report released by the U.N. Food and Agricultural Organization estimates that 24 percent of the fish stocks worldwide are depleted or in danger of depletion, while another 52 percent are being fished at their biological limit.

This raises some tough questions, among them: Can we eat more fish and shellfish to improve our health without degrading the health of our oceans and marine resources at the same time? The answer will be yes if we purchase seafood that is harvested in a sustainable manner.

This means seafood that comes either from fishing practices that prohibit healthy fish populations from being overharvested, or ones that permit depleted or threatened fish populations to recover.

But if we go to the market with our newfound resolve, how do we know which fish and shellfish are harvested in a sustainable manner? As of April 2005, the U.S. Department of Agriculture has made it mandatory for all supermarkets to list the country of origin and whether the seafood is wild or farm-raised.

Perusing the seafood counter at my local grocery store, I saw wild striped bass from the United States, farm-raised shrimp from Thailand, wild caught sea scallops from the United States, farm-raised tilapia from El Salvador, and farmed Atlantic salmon from Ireland. The signs helped, but I still did not know whether this bounty was harvested in a sustainable manner.

Since 1999, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), an independent, global, nonprofit organization created by Unilever, the world's largest seafood buyer, and the World Wildlife Fund, has been working with fisheries around the world to certify wild-capture fisheries that meet 23 sustainability criteria based on sustainable fish stocks, a healthy marine environment and effective management.

Fourteen fisheries are currently certified, including Western Australian rock lobster, New Zealand hoki and Alaskan salmon – the latter being the first U.S. fishery to earn MSC certification. Twenty-one other fisheries worldwide are undergoing full assessment, while about 15 others are in pre-assessment.

The total catch from fisheries taking part in the program exceeds 3 million tons, which accounts for approximately 4 percent of the world's wild seafood catch. All wild salmon from Alaska comes from

this certified sustainable fishery, no matter where it is sold.

So look for the MSC label, which is turquoise with a white line drawing of a fish whose back and tail fin are shaped like a check mark of approval.

Purchasing seafood that is harvested in a sustainable manner allows us not only the chance to reinvigorate our New Year's resolution of eating more healthily, but it could also satisfy an automa-

tic, added resolution: protecting the health of our marine environment as an investment in our future health as individuals. ■

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