

Fish Food

Sam Sifton

Advertisement

[SKIP ADVERTISEMENT](#)

You're reading The Morning newsletter. Your daily guide to understanding what's happening — and why it matters. Hosted by Sam Sifton, for readers in the U.S. and Canada.

Good morning. The Nobel Peace Prize was awarded to Navi Pillay, a South African human rights lawyer who led a United Nations commission last year that found that Israel had committed genocide against Palestinians in Gaza. (The Israeli government denounced the report.) And Hurricane Isaias is strengthening. The Gulf Coast could start feeling its impact as soon as this afternoon.

There's more below. But first, let's see where our fish comes from.

Image



Image





Credit...The New York Times

We humans eat a lot of seafood. Global consumption of fish has doubled in the last 60 years. Unsurprisingly, that is having an effect on the number of fish in the sea. Something like a third of the world's stocks are being harvested at unsustainable levels. We can't go on like this.

Fish farming — aquaculture is the fancy term — was meant to help. After all, why harvest what's left of our wild fish under unpredictable conditions out at sea when you can grow fish under relatively controlled ones? And by some measures, it's working. More than half of the fish we consume now comes from fish farms, most of them in China, India, Indonesia, Vietnam, Bangladesh and Norway.

But what do you think those farmed fish eat? Wild fish, harvested all over the world and ground into fish meal. They eat a lot of it. At some Norwegian fish farms, for example, a single salmon might consume up to five times its weight in fish meal as it grows to market size. That's a lot of anchovies.

Image





Credit...The New York Times

Which is a conundrum. Aquaculture, meant to relieve the pressures of overfishing, is actually making overfishing worse. Beyond this, [a new investigation](#) shows that it is powered by murky, dangerous, environmentally destructive and sometimes illegal economic engines.

The investigation was led by Ian Urbina, a former Times journalist who for years has run the Outlaw Ocean Project, an investigative journalism nonprofit based in Washington. Ian worked with dozens of reporters from as many countries to research and independently corroborate it, boarding fish meal ships and visiting fish meal factories and aquaculture farms all over the world to find evidence of the industry's dangers. The work took five years, Ian told me yesterday.

The team found many tales of bad actors at sea and on the mainland. Here are some of the highlights:

The ships. More than 10,000 vessels around the world supply the fish meal industry. Reporters went aboard ships in the South China Sea and at the far edges of the North Atlantic Ocean. They reviewed logbooks and interviewed workers. Working conditions on some of the ships were wretched. The work was dangerous, occasionally fatal. And hundreds of the vessels were discovered fishing in closed or protected waters, ignoring quotas on certain species, or fishing without licenses. Their nets scraped the ocean floor, destroying ecosystems that used to feed humans directly, but now were being used to provide feed for farms far away.

The plants. There are 1,400 fish meal factories around the world. Ian's team visited some in Peru, Gambia, India, Indonesia, Mauritania, Senegal and Thailand. Workers in them shovel mounds of decaying fish into giant machines that cook them, press them dry and grind them into fish meal. That's not just smelly work. It's a health hazard. The awful stench of rotting fish, which radiates for miles in every direction, comes from a chemical that has been found to be carcinogenic. Occasionally, the plants burst into flames. More than 16.5 million people — including nearly two million under the age of 15 — live within a mile of one. The tension can lead to unrest, to protests or strikes. Sometimes there has been violence.

The farms. Aquaculture facilities are where the stinky fruit of all this labor ends up — sometimes well inland from the sea, as in China, which has made remarkable progress in fish farming. (They use a lot of antimicrobials and antiseptics, though, which bring other dangers.) In Norway, by contrast, fish farms are made up of huge pens in the open ocean. Fed a diet of fish meal, the salmon within them produce, Ian writes,

“three times as much waste in a year as the country’s 5.6 million residents flush down their toilets.” That sewage falls to the ocean floor, where it forms a toxic sludge that asphyxiates all beneath it.

The plate. Since 2022, the United States has been the world’s largest importer of seafood, bringing in enormous quantities of farmed shrimp, salmon, tilapia and catfish. In part that’s because American health and environmental regulations make it very expensive to farm fish here. So grocery chains and restaurants buy the cheaper stuff from abroad and sell it to us beneath advertising claims that claim it’s ethical and sustainable. Often, it’s anything but.

“By using seafood caught in poor countries to grow seafood for rich countries,” Ian told me yesterday, “today’s fish farming is driving ocean depletion, labor abuse, rampant pollution and violent civil unrest far from our dinner plate.”

Which is to say, I’ve only scratched the surface. [I really urge you to read the whole story.](#) The United Nations says that by 2035, almost two-thirds of the seafood eaten worldwide will be farmed. Most of it will likely be raised on fish meal. That’s what’s for dinner.

THE NOBEL PEACE PRIZE

Image

