

SeaStars

Choosing Seafood with Lydia Bergen

—by Cristina Santiestevan



Lydia Bergen

With so many seafood options available, it can be difficult to select something tasty, healthy and environmentally friendly. Now, we must consider health issues, such as mercury content or PCB levels. And we try to understand the environmental effects—some seafood choices are harvested in ways that are devastating to our oceans and fisheries. We all want to make the best choices possible, but where to start? Lydia Bergen manages the New England Aquarium’s Sustainable Fisheries Initiative, which is working to make our seafood choices a bit easier.

You have degrees in geology and public policy. How did you get involved in seafood issues?

I grew up on the north shore of Long Island, and have always been fond of the ocean. Before coming to the Aquarium, I knew there were environmental groups working to encourage people to be responsible about their seafood choices. I carried a Seafood Watch card, but I did not really get involved in seafood issues until I started this position.

What is sustainable seafood?

Well, I like to refer to seafood choices as more or less *environmentally responsible*. For example, some environmentally irresponsible fishing methods harm ocean habitats, such as trawl nets that drag along the ocean’s floor. An environmentally responsible choice would be farmed clams, which are believed to have little or no negative impact on ocean habitats.

Why should we care?

If you like seafood, you should care. Many things, including climate change, pollution and fishing, threaten the ocean and its fisheries. There is a real chance that the seafood we eat today will continue to decline and will be unavailable for future generations to enjoy.

Do you eat seafood?

Yes, I love seafood. My favorite is fresh albacore tuna marinated in teriyaki sauce and grilled. Before I lived in California, the only tuna I knew was what came out of a can. Then I started going to barbecues and having fresh, grilled tuna. I got totally

hooked. I love it so much that I had 50 pounds of it shipped from Oregon to upstate New York for my wedding. I wanted tuna fresh from the Pacific Ocean. The caterers overcooked it a bit since they weren’t used to handling it, but it was still tasty.

I now know that big fish such as tuna are usually high in mercury. As a new mom, I have decided to eliminate tuna from my diet, but I’m looking forward to eating it again in the future!

Note: Due to known mercury contamination, the U.S. Food and Drug Administration recommends that women who are pregnant, may become pregnant or are nursing should limit their consumption of albacore tuna to three meals a month.

Surely you’ve been at a restaurant where someone at your table is about to order an environmentally irresponsible seafood choice. How do you handle it?

I’ll almost always speak up, even if it’s someone I don’t know well. I try to offer the information I have and let them make their own choice. Or sometimes people will ask me. I often think people wonder, “Can I order that with Lydia around?”

Are there any simple rules that people can follow when buying seafood?

Unfortunately, there are no real rules of thumb for making environmentally responsible seafood choices. Vegetarian species that are farm-raised, such as tilapia, tend to be good choices. But not all farmed species or farm operators are environmentally responsible. On the wild side, species

caught with trawls and other gear that damages the ocean floor are generally considered less environmentally responsible than those caught with a long-line. But, some would argue that long-line fisheries are more likely to accidentally catch and kill at-risk species such as sea turtles and sharks. So, it gets complicated.

What advice would you give to people who are trying to make responsible seafood choices?

Ask questions when you are buying seafood. Where is it from? How was it caught? Is it farmed or wild? If you are asking questions about the seafood, the people you are buying it from will also start thinking about these issues. Eventually, this will help the long-term greening of the entire seafood supply chain.

The Aquarium’s Sustainable Fisheries Initiative (SFI) promotes ocean-friendly seafood through programs such as Fish of the Month and ChoiceCatch. The Fish of the Month program highlights different environmentally responsible seafood choices by serving them in the Aquarium’s Café and having recipes available on the Aquarium’s website. ChoiceCatch works directly with seafood buyers and sellers to help companies identify environmentally responsible seafood choices for their stores. In New England, you can find ChoiceCatch seafood at Stop & Shop.

Learn more about Fish of the Month, ChoiceCatch and the Sustainable Fisheries Initiative at www.neaq.org/fisheries. ●