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QUADRANT

Environment

The Green Torpedoes That Sank the National Fishing Fleet

Walter Starck

Every few years government increases the sin taxes on alcohol, tobacco and gambling. Like a predatory prelate they accompany their depredations with generous helpings of righteous waffle, but the reality remains these are in effect regressive taxes disproportionately borne by “working families”. The number of people who may give up smoking, drinking or gambling because of the increased cost is vanishingly small. For most it means their families just have to get by on less.

The recent announcement of another increase in the tax on tobacco prompted a friend to wonder why it is that the Japanese have so much lower rates of cancer and heart disease as well as living longer than we do, when they smoke like chimneys. Looking into this a bit revealed something both quite hopeful but also unsettling. Rather than keeping the reader wondering where all this is going, I will first cut to the bottom line and then explain. It appears there is good reason to think it’s not the tobacco companies who are killing smokers so much as it is our own government.

Here’s why. The Japanese have much higher rates of smoking than we do. They also eat a lot of salt and have higher levels of hypertension, but nevertheless, they still have much lower rates of heart disease and lung cancer. This pattern also occurs in other countries with high levels of seafood consumption, but Japanese Americans living in Hawaii and eating a more Western diet have much higher levels of heart disease. Epidemiologists think that the most likely explanation is the protective effect of high levels of seafood consumption.

While lifestyle and environmental contaminants are important contributors to health problems, the biggest and most readily addressed factor is what we eat. The modern diet loads us with an excess of saturated fats, trans-fats, sugar, salt and refined starch in the form of highly processed food products laced with a cocktail of additives to enhance flavour, texture and colour and to retard spoilage. What is missing is a host of essential vitamins, minerals, trace elements, antioxidants and other nutrients lost in processing and depleted in the products of industrialised agriculture and animal husbandry. Also missing are the synergies which arise from the combinations of nutrients found in whole natural foods.

Like animals raised on formulated pellets, we grow fast, big and fat but are prone to old-age disorders beginning in early mid-life. Studies of human populations who have exceptional longevity and health in old age repeatedly find consumption of low levels of processed food, high levels of fresh vegetables, low levels of red meat and often high levels of seafood.

Water is the universal solvent. All of the trace elements and minerals necessary to life are in sea water. Every one of the ninety-two naturally occurring elements is there and, except for a few inlets and bays, human pollutants remain at far lower levels in the sea than are present in most agricultural and grazing land.

Recent large-scale clinical and epidemiological studies published in the world’s leading medical journals have reported a broad range of health benefits associated with seafood. Of

especial importance have been those associated with omega-3 fatty acids which are low in most foods from the land but are abundant in seafood.

Regular consumption of seafood (two or more meals per week) has been found to provide significant health benefits in three broad categories. These are cardiovascular; immune system related; and conditions involving neurological development and functioning. Regular seafood consumption correlates with low levels of heart disease as well as reduced incidence of asthma, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis, hypertension, migraine headaches, certain cancers, age-related maculopathy and some kidney diseases. It has also been shown to enhance brain development and has indicated significant cognitive and behavioural benefits for children. In adults it has been found to be significant in reducing aggression, depression and moderating schizophrenia as well as enhancing cognitive functioning in old age. The old wives were right. Fish really is a brain food and mismanaging our fisheries is quite literally stupid.

The difference in incidence of these disorders between countries with high levels of seafood consumption and our own population would save billions of dollars each year in our health care system and contribute hugely to a greatly improved quality of life for millions of people, if only we would realise this and implement it.

Although government and health care professionals are aware of the desirability of greater seafood consumption and some efforts are being made to promote this, no formal cost-benefit assessment has been conducted and there is little appreciation of the actual magnitude of potential benefits either financial or societal. Worse still, any real increase in consumption is being thwarted by restrictions on supply and prohibitive prices for seafood resulting from the gross mismanagement of our marine resources by a bloated, incompetent and often malign bureaucracy. These may seem excessively harsh words but they are both considered and warranted.

Briefly, here are some key facts:

- Australia has the largest fishing zone (EEZ) per capita in the world. It is over 6 million square kilometres in area. While the global average for EEZ area is about 2 hectares per capita, Australia has close to 30 hectares per capita.
- The Australian annual fishery harvest rate is the lowest in the world at around 37 kilograms per square kilometre (or 370 grams per hectare) while the global average rate is over twenty times greater.
- The natural productivity of Australian waters is not low. Primary productivity (PP) of the oceans is continuously monitored by satellite at one-kilometre resolution. The average for Australia is higher than that of New Zealand, yet the New Zealanders produce over twice the total catch from an EEZ area half as large and with only an eighth of the more productive shelf area. It is also higher than that of Papua New Guinea, yet their waters produce half again as much as our total catch with only one-third the EEZ area and a thirtieth the shelf area. Even Japan has a lower average PP, one-quarter of the EEZ area and about a fifth of the shelf area, but they produce thirty times more catch.
- Two-thirds of Australia's domestic seafood consumption is imported. All of these imports come from resources much more heavily impacted than our own. Our largest supplier is Thailand. It has an EEZ area almost twenty times smaller than Australia and about a tenth of the shelf area, but a total catch about fourteen times larger.

The reason for this astounding disparity in our fishery production compared to that everywhere else can be explained in one word: bureaucracy. We have the most restrictive and onerous fishery management in the world; it is also the most costly per unit of catch. In many of our smaller fisheries, management costs are greater than the GDP of the sector—money could be saved by paying the fishermen not to fish at all and doing away with the management. Despite all this expensive management, Australian fisheries are in widespread decline. The latest Australian Bureau of Agricultural and Resource Economics statistics show that the gross value of Australian fisheries production has declined by about 30 per cent in real terms over the past decade and exports have declined by 44 per cent. However, nowhere is this due to overfishing or a collapse of stocks. Everywhere it is due to restrictions, requirements and management imposed costs.

You hear a lot of eco-waffle regarding marine resources—words like *sustainability*, *precaution*, *threatened*, *endangered*, *biodiversity*—but the reality is not nearly so urgent or dramatic. These are emotive terms dressed up to sound scientific. They are used to lend an aura of importance to hypothetical speculations when seeking extravagant funding for theoretical solutions to imaginary problems. The simple truth is that no marine fish or invertebrate has ever been exterminated by fishing and none in Australia are even remotely threatened in this regard. The only truly endangered marine species in Australia is the Australian fisherman.

Our fisheries management is not about saving endangered species or beneficial use of resources. It is all about bureaucratic empire building, grant-seeking researchers and political pandering for green votes. The reality is out there, over the horizon and underwater where the truth is safely inaccessible. Anyone can claim anything and who's to know. Spending \$1.7 billion a year to import a renewable resource we already have in abundance, paying for it by selling off non-renewable resources and calling this sustainable management is beyond stupid.

The situation with our aquaculture is, if anything, even worse. Aquaculture is the fastest growing sector in world food production. During the past three decades global production has increased by over 1200 per cent with an average compound annual growth of around 9 per cent. Australia, with some 60,000 kilometres of mostly uninhabited coastline well suited for aquaculture, a mild climate and unpolluted coastal waters, clearly has vast potential, yet development of the industry is now declining after a weak start.

A comparison of Australian aquaculture production with that of a sampling of other nations is instructive. Thailand and Vietnam each has only about an eighth of Australia's coastline; but each has around thirty times greater aquaculture production than Australia. The EU has over forty times greater production. Even New Zealand has more than double Australia's production. Although the small size of Australia's industry has been attributed to higher cost structure there is obviously something more to it than this. Certainly Australian costs for land, labour, equipment, energy and feedstock are at no disadvantage to Canada, France, Japan, Norway, the UK, or the USA, yet all have hugely greater aquaculture industries.

Again, the real reason is simply bureaucratic over-regulation. Despite the world's best natural conditions for it, aquaculture in Australia has been strangled at birth by an impossible morass of regulations. These impose far greater costs, delays and uncertainties than anywhere else. Apart from a few exceptions that became well established before regulation made new operations uneconomic, aquaculture here has actually been declining in recent years while it

continues to boom elsewhere. At the same time, our farmers and graziers are facing similar mismanagement and decline, all of which is reflected in the fastest-growing food prices of any OECD country. Projection of trends over the past couple of decades indicates that within another decade we will be net importers of food, dependent on others to feed us, if they can.

The only sector booming here is bureaucracy. Our environmental and resource management agencies have become sheltered workshops where otherwise unemployable third-rate academics are allowed to proclaim themselves experts about things few have ever seen briefly if at all. Even though genuine scientific understanding is usually very limited and often wrong, they pretend to manage distant industries by remote control from air-conditioned offices hundreds or thousands of kilometres away. The result has been steadily declining production, dying industries and devastated families, but ever-increasing management costs. Even recreational fishers have been mindlessly and needlessly burdened with elaborate restrictions. Everyone is now paying for this obscene charade at great cost to mind, health and pocketbook. Green politics and bureaucracy are killing the fishing industry and, in doing so, also killing millions of Australians. This will not stop until an awakened public demands it.

Incidentally, in looking into the protective effects of seafood in regard to smoking, I was surprised to find that there also appears to be good evidence published in respected medical journals which indicates that for some health conditions smoking itself has protective value. Ulcerative colitis and Parkinsonism are examples. Of course, this is probably not politically correct to mention and for once I won't go further. However, the next time you hear some politician righteously paying out on the tobacco industry, just remember who is holding the smoking gun and demanding we stand and deliver.

Walter Starck grew up in a family of fishermen on an island in the Florida Keys. He has a PhD in marine science from the Institute of Marine Science at the University of Miami. He was a pioneer in the study of coral reef biology and the development of undersea technology. His fishery experience includes all three of major oceans and the Mediterranean Sea.

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