

Seafood and Health

Government's state of confusion

By **WALTER STARCK**

Over the past few years a growing number of studies have reported significant health benefits associated with seafood and the Government has implemented efforts to encourage greater consumption.

At the same time it has imposed ever more stringent demands on a fishing industry already in decline from over-regulation. With a growing domestic consumption of seafood now 70 percent dependent on imports, these too are being subjected to costly new restrictions. The government is telling us to eat more seafood while at the same time making it increasingly scarce and expensive.



In recent decades, seafood consumption has increased substantially in most developed countries. Growing affluence and a greater range of food choice combined with changing culinary tastes, plus an increased awareness of the health benefits, have all contributed to its increased popularity. In the past, seafood tended to be a cheaper, less desirable alternative to traditional meats from domestic animals. Now it has the status and price of gourmet cuisine. In the late 1930s Australian seafood consumption was only 4.9kg per capita per year. Annual per capita consumption is now 20kg. A CSIRO study estimates that by the year 2020 an additional 610,000 tonnes will be needed to meet growing demand. This amount represents an almost 400 percent further growth in imports over the next thirteen years.

The nutritional and health benefits of seafood make such growth in demand desirable. Seafood is high in proteins and low in fats, cholesterol, and sodium. It is also an excellent source of minerals and vitamins. It is easier to digest than red meats and poultry and is among the most nutritionally balanced of foods. It aids weight control and is highly beneficial in preventing heart disease.

In particular, seafood is high in essential omega-3 fatty acids which are deficient in most terrestrial foods. Their consumption has been found to be beneficial in preventing or alleviating asthma, arthritis, osteoporosis, diabetes, multiple sclerosis,

hypertension, migraine headaches, certain cancers, age related maculopathy and some kidney diseases. They also play a vital role in neurological development and functioning. Perhaps most important of all, a diet rich in seafood facilitates brain development and has indicated significant cognitive and behavioural benefits for children. It has also been found to be significant in reducing depression and schizophrenia in adults as well as enhancing cognitive functioning with ageing. The bottom line is that high levels of seafood consumption correlate directly with happier, healthier, longer lives.

Australia has the largest per capita marine area in the world and vast areas of coastal waters un-impacted by human activity. We also have the world's lowest level of fishery harvest and so must import most of the seafood we consume. All of these imports come from areas far more heavily fished than our own. They currently add some \$1.8 billion annually to a foreign debt that is growing twice as fast as the economy. This cost is also rapidly increasing. Still, with no demonstrated problem but simply as "precautionary measures," office-bound resource bureaucrats continue to add to an ever-growing morass of restrictions on our own fishing industry. This is unneeded, unethical and unaffordable. We could easily sustain a fishery harvest several times larger than the present one, need no imports and still have the most lightly harvested and pristine marine environment in the world. Political pandering to misinformed environmental concerns and an incompetent, out of control bureaucracy unanswerable for any results is more than just a problem for fishermen. It is a detriment to the entire nation. Australians are paying for this mismanagement with their health, their mental functioning and their pocketbooks. This situation is largely unrecognised and won't improve unless an aroused public begins to demand it be addressed. Appeals to unverified computer models, claims of scientific authority and wafflings of eco-gibberish aren't good enough. Show us the evidence!

Fish really is a brain food and it would quite literally be stupid to continue to mismanage our fisheries. It seems particularly ironic to call ourselves "The Smart State" and "The Clever Country" while closing down our fisheries, preventing aquaculture from even getting started and selling off non-renewable resources to pay for imported seafood we could easily produce in abundance at higher quality and better prices. One might well imagine a new generation of Asians talking about Australia, "Lovely country, too bad about their brains."

Reference

An excellent reference on the health benefits of seafood can be downloaded in PDF form at:

<http://www.seafood.net.au/clk.php?name=http://www.seafood.net.au/files/whathealthy.pdf>

It is entitled – *What's so healthy about seafood? – a guide for seafood marketers*, 2nd edition, Fisheries Research and Development Corporation pp. iv + 40, 2004

It can also be ordered in print form at the Seafood Services Australia Website, <http://www.seafood.net.au>