

# Fish: The Other Fright Meat

by Mark Mathew Braunstein

Vegetarianism must be very fashionable, because so many people brand themselves veg even when they are not. Even when they eat fish and other sea animals. Indeed, eating fish and clams may appear benign compared to consuming calves and lambs. Fish after all are a world apart from farm animals, as fish live in water while farms sit on land. Fish also are a class apart, as fish are cold-blooded and most dwell in the wild, while calves and lambs (and humans, too) are warm-blooded and domesticated (as are humans, too).



One of the most haunting of Bruegel's images, *Big Fish Eat Little Fish* is among the first of the artist's many treatments of proverbs in paintings or prints. The image reveals many small and large fish tumbling out of the mouth of an enormous beached fish. A small, helmeted figure with an oversized knife slices open the big fish's belly, revealing even more marine creatures. Land, air, and water seem to be overrun by an odd assortment of real and fantastic fish, while in the foreground a man, accompanied by his son, gestures toward the scene. The meaning of his gesture is conveyed in the Flemish inscription below, which translates: "Look son, I have long known that the big fish eat the small." This vernacular form of the ancient Latin proverb, which appears in majuscule lettering just above, relates

to the theme of a senseless world in which the powerful instinctively and consistently prey on the weak. That the son understands the lesson is apparent from his gesture toward the other man in the boat, who has extracted a small fish from a larger one. Bruegel's brilliant visualization of the proverb was first conceived as a drawing (Vienna, Graphische Sammlung Albertina) that is signed by the artist and dated 1556. This engraving by Pieter van der Heyden, however, is signed in the lower left corner with the name Hieronymus Bosch, who had died in 1516. The print's publisher, Hieronymus Cock, was probably responsible for replacing Bruegel's name with that of the more famous and salable Bosch, who had, not coincidentally, a major influence on Bruegel. —Metropolitan Museum of Art

## Something Smells Fishy

To those who subscribe to the Western hierarchical scheme of higher and lower life forms, among the animals that humans eat fish rank rather low, and invertebrate sea animals even lower. Hence the life of a fish or a clam might be valued less than that of a calf or a lamb. On the other hand, an entire fish or handfuls of clams often are consumed in a single meal, while a single calf or a lamb can last many months of many meals. Eternity's ledger has not yet measured how many hundreds of lives of lobsters or oysters equal the life of a single cow or a sow. So rather than compare cows with fish, let's compare factory farming with fishing.

Compared to the slaughterhouse, fishing has much to commend it. The Huck Finn kind of fishing, fishing with a hook and line, one-on-one, one angler to one fish. Up at sunrise casting in a tree-lined stream. A lazy day sitting by a verdant pond. Drifting across an open lake by the setting sun. The old man and the sea, and rowboat or sail boat. Reeling in a large and embattled fish can become a struggle, but once landed the angler can knock the fish unconscious or knock it dead.

Most commercial fishing, however, comes with lots of strings attached. Nets. Large schools of fish captured in nets and plucked from water beat frantically against each other, struggle to exhaustion, until finally they suffocate aloft in the air which their gills cannot inhale. Frightened to death, literally, dying fish pump their bodies full of adrenaline until slow suffocation induces rigor mortis. Both adrenaline and rigor mortis detract from the flavor of fish. Nor do they add much in favor of commercial fishing. Nets are an ancient device, but purse-seine and driftnets are endemic of the technological age of the feedlot and the factory farm.

## Purse-Seine Nets

The tuna fishing industry and its purse-seine nets have borne the scorn of environmentalists for an entire human generation and of dolphins for dozens of dolphin generations. Yellow fin tuna and dolphins, for reasons unknown, swim together, the dolphins above, the tuna below. Fishing fleets track the dolphins to lead them to their quarry, then spread out nets to encircle and capture both. American fleets are required by law to take care to release the dolphins, and with care, they could free all the dolphins. But who cares? Instead many dolphins are drowned, or if they survive many are maimed, or if they are young many are separated from their mothers, or if they are released many are severely traumatized. Many? How many? American fishing fleets are allowed quotas of dead dolphins, below which numbers dolphin kills are legal, but to dolphins one dolphin is one too many. Because Americans have not yet developed a penchant for French fried Flipper, the legally drowned dolphins are dumped back into the sea. Or maybe not. Few cats raise questions about the distinctly new taste of their tuna-flavor cat food.

In a cetacean holocaust, tuna fishers needlessly have slaughtered millions of dolphins and other marine mammals. Many environmentalists eat only a critical few species of tuna allegedly caught by tuna fishers employing methods that do not kill marine mammals. Yet we ethically motivated vegetarians, as odd absolutists, abstain from all types of all tuna because all tuna fishers kill ... *tuna*.

## Driftnets

Purse-seine nets contribute just a drop in the bucket of brine when measured against the total devastation rendered by driftnets. These are lightweight expanses of synthetic

netting set adrift as submerged walls of death through which no aquatic animals can pass. Millions of netted fish of low market value are dumped dead or dying back into the sea. In addition to fish, the driftnets drown also whales, dolphins, porpoises, sea lions, sea birds, turtles, in short, every living creature in sight. And because some nets extend to a depth of nearly 100 feet, they drown every living creature beyond sight too.

Such nets typically extend death a mile long. Fishing fleets of Southeast Asian countries extend their curtains of death in the Pacific Ocean to twenty miles. One mile or twenty, they are equally illegal. International maritime treaties have banned driftnets since 1992, yet twenty years later the carnage continues because not a single nation has empowered any of its federal agencies to enforce the ban in international waters. In the Mediterranean Sea, only the camera crew of Oceana monitors and publicizes the piracy. Throughout the vast Atlantic and Pacific Oceans, the only crews engaged in any documentation and occasional obstruction of the fishing bandits are the volunteers upon the scant three ships sailed by the Sea Shepherd Society.

Enforcement ultimately rests with us, the consumers, every time we sit down to dinner. We must discriminate, because the nets do not. Nor do nets disintegrate. Fishing fleets abandon or lose many untold miles of synthetic fiber driftnets every year. Discarded and dislodged nets float beyond the grasp of human greed and continue entangling animals who in turn become bait for other marine life who in turn become entrapped, until finally by the sheer weight of all the dead bodies, the nets sink to the bottom of the sea. These eerily are called ghost driftnets, but that gives a bad name to ghosts.

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### Fish Farms

Ocean fish catches diminish in their haul year after year. This is due both to depletion and to pollution. When an oil spill occurs off the coast of Louisiana or Alaska the news media bemoans the damage to the fishing industry. Not to the fish, but to the fishing industry. Step in human ingenuity. Some species of marketed fish now are raised in ocean pens. Fishing has fast become farming. Farmed salmon constitute half of all salmon sales. But there is a catch.

Aquatic farming techniques generate a set of problems similar to those inherent to terrestrial factory farms (see the "Fish Farms" article in this magazine for more details). During the nearly three years necessary for a salmon to achieve maximum body size, its food is fortified with synthetics and laced with drugs. Still it suffers high susceptibility to disease and parasites. And due to overcrowding, it displays the neurotic behavior of self-mutilation and cannibalism. A true Chicken of the Sea.

### Invertebrate Sea Animals

Lobster and crab. Oyster and clam. Scallop and squid and shrimp. Some possess eyes, others not. Those we cannot look into the eye we may view as less than animals and treat accordingly. Humans even call them seafood, not sea animals. While none may scratch its head over issues beyond the attainment of sustenance and shelter, nor shed a tear for its poisoned peers in the Chesapeake Bay, the shrimp does experience pain, the oyster deprivation, the lobster distress.

We may never see for ourselves the veal calf confined in its crate or may never bring ourselves to wring the neck of a live chicken. But the lobster presents quite a different story. Sold

live in the marketplace and even restaurants, it is packed in the tank as tightly as a sardine in a can and deprived of food so its feces will not sully the water. It would starve to death were it not first boiled to death. More humanely pour the boiling water over the lobster? Or more cruelly place the lobster into the boiling water? Twin terrors. Either way, the lobster finds itself in hot water.

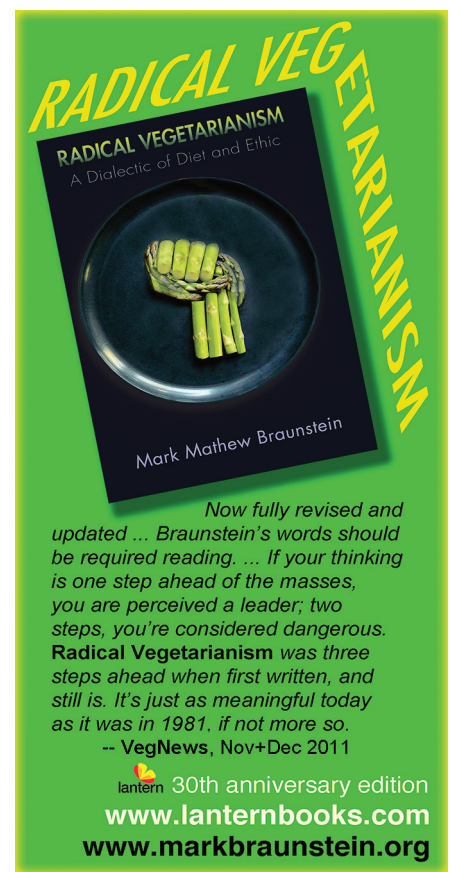
Whether a lobster or any invertebrate sea animal is entitled to the same (few) inherent rights as a veal calf or a broiler chicken is a complex issue better left to marine phylogenists and moral philosophers. Let's retain some backbone to our discussion and examine instead the incidental kill to larger marine animals by the nets set for shrimp. Actually the tragedy seems vaguely familiar but with new performers, a cast of thousands.

### Gillnets

Nets intended for shrimp have long drowned sea turtles. Turtle Excluder Devices (TED) do largely prevent this, but the American shrimp industry has long resisted their use on shrimp nets because a scant one-tenth of the shrimp escape with the turtles.

Meanwhile shrimp trawlers under other flagships continue their business as usual. They long have used monofilament gillnets. Lightweight and nearly invisible underwater, these nets are illegal in American waters, but sale of the netted shrimp to American markets is not.

Far worse is what they do not sell, the so-called "by-catch" (buy cash!) that is ensnared and dumped back into the sea. For every pound of shrimp that makes it to a dinner plate, as much as 26 pounds of fish, seabirds, turtles, porpoises, dolphins and even whales are dumped back dead during this biological strip mining of the sea.



### The Dead End

Future human generations, if any exist, will regard our century as The Golden Age, that is, the age when gold was the measure of all things. Our mistreatment of sea animals is but one consequence of our greed. Our treatment of sea animals will not change until our economic values change. Economy opposes ecology.

The equations are apparent. More people equals greater demand for food. More people equals fewer sea animals. The solutions also are apparent. Seven billion humans alive today seems enough. Some of us fear that by the end of our own present human generation, nearly all species of large marine animals will be as dead as the Dodo. Optimists hope it is not too late to step back from the brink of the abyss. Whatever our belief, the time has come to side with the scapegoat, the sitting duck, the underdog, with Charlie the Tuna, and with the Chicken of the Sea. 🍱