

# The Black Fish

## Joining the fight for the oceans

BY WIETSE van der Werf, Black Fish co-founder

"Science may have found a cure for most evils, but it has found no remedy for the worst of them all—the apathy of human beings"—Helen Keller

Last summer an activist group named the Black Fish cut free ten dolphins at the annual dolphin drive hunt in Japan. The attention was huge and helped to make the Black Fish into an international marine action organization within a number of months. Currently working towards the purchase of a ship, the Black Fish is preparing for some ambitious direct action campaigns to protect the marine environment.

Out of the many stories telling the tales of ecological destruction at the hands of humans, there is one that is definitely not told as often as it should. This story features countless examples of animal cruelty, human greed, corruption, criminality and ultimately the mass extinction of large numbers of wild species of animals, plants and invertebrates such as crustaceans, corals and mollusks. This is the story of industrial fishing and unchecked exploitation of the world's oceans, seas, rivers, lakes and coastal regions. In recent years human activity has impacted the oceans to such an extent that it is no overstatement to say that industrial fishing and aquaculture are among the most destructive human activities on earth.

Covering three-quarters of the globe, the oceans are the largest wilderness on this planet and the deep blue depths are home to the largest number of species. The total mass of the oceans, seas, rivers and lakes make up 99% of the space which supports life on earth and the majority of our oxygen originates from the seas as one-celled organisms called phytoplankton absorb CO2 and convert it into oxygen. Life on land very heavily depends

on life in the ocean so its protection is vital for our own survival, although we aren't exactly acting like it. Bit by bit, marine life is increasingly threatened and in many situations we are close to reaching the point of no return.

For centuries people have been involved in fishing. It has been the pillar on which many a civilization has been built. Fish were plentiful and the seas were seen as an inexhaustible source of food as well as a dumping ground so big that any waste discarded in it would simply disperse and vanish. During the 1950's things changed. Aided by technologies developed during the World Wars, such as radar and sonar, the fishing industry experienced a technological revolution it had never seen before. Fishing companies were able to build larger vessels which could stay at sea for longer periods and they equipped the fishing fleets to become ruthlessly efficient at their job: catching fish. New fishing techniques were developed and, with improved engine power, ships were able to travel the world over and catch whatever, wherever they wanted. Fish became cheap and aided by government subsidies, the golden age of fishing seemed endless.

Different fishing techniques which had been used for centuries started being produced on an industrial scale. Driftnets for example could now measure over 25 kilometers in length and catch everything in their path. The nets are often referred to as the 'curtains of death' as they catch indiscriminately, killing many more different species than those targeted. Millions of whales, dolphins, turtles, sharks, rays and an unimaginable number of fish and other smaller creatures have found their end at the hands of driftnets. Longlines are similar in their destructive effect: these lines can be kilometers in length and



*Beam-trawler fishing along the Belgian coast. Photo credit: flickr.com/adstream*

the baited hooks, which are attached approximately every 30 centimeter will randomly catch animals that bite on the bait. The lines are left out for a number of hours (or sometimes days) and most animals that get hooked either suffocate or die of the stress involved with their efforts to free themselves from the trap. Driftnets and longlines are so damaging that various organizations have campaigned successfully for new international rules to be drawn up, restricting driftnets over a certain size. Unfortunately, as enforcement is pretty much non-existent on the high seas, the practices still continue. The UN passed a driftnet ban in 1992 but longlines are yet to be outlawed.

Bottom trawling is another technique which has grown in efficiency in recent decades and causes irreplaceable damage to the marine environment. Vessels equipped for this type of fishing have large nets attached to the back or sides of the ship, which are lowered to a depth where they reach the seabed. Large metal plates located on each side of the trawl net push it wide open as the ship pulls them through the sea. The net then scrapes the seabed. Corals, sponges, bottom dwelling fish, all cut down and dragged up. There are many examples where areas which are estimated to have taken tens of thousands of years to flourish, are cut down and turned into rubble in a matter of minutes. The sheer size and efficiency of the industrial trawlers which are active nowadays leave many species with no chance of survival.

It is clear that we are headed towards an incredible environmental catastrophe, the consequences we can only imagine. As many of the top predators, such as sharks and tuna are becoming increasingly threatened due to the indiscriminate overfishing, the balances within the marine ecosystem's food chain have become distorted as

some species, such as the jellyfish, are well on their way to rule the waves while others, such as the bluefin tuna, are nearing extinction. It is not just overfishing which is the main threat. The long and growing list of impacts on the oceans now include mining, habitat loss, waste pollution, illegal fishing, coral destruction, oil exploration, gas drilling, tourism, oxygen depletion, increasing ship movements and of course climate change, causing ocean acidification, coral bleaching and fluctuation of otherwise stable water temperatures. It is not just one or a number of these impacts that threaten the ocean life, it is the combination of all of them. None of the species stand a chance against the might of modern technology and many are thought to have perished even before we have had a chance to discover them.

It would be a lie to say that no-one cares about these issues, in fact there is a growing movement of people, groups and organizations that bring these problems into the public arena and in some instances with success. There is however one trend which is causing more damage than it's trying to avoid. Many marine conservation organizations promote the consumption of "sustainable" fish as a good way of supporting fishermen that do the "right thing." In recent years various "good fish" initiatives have been launched, such as Friend of the Sea, Fish Wise and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The latter started in 1997, as a joint enterprise by the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the food corporation Unilever. The MSC certification process has since grown to become the most popular "good fish" label in the world.

Various environmental organizations have jumped in to support the MSC system while there is growing evidence that even MSC certified fishing activity is causing damage to marine life. How can it be that, for ex-





*Planning for upcoming campaigns in the Mediterranean Sea*



*Bluefin tuna is heavily threatened by overfishing*

Photo by Marco Carli #8730 @Maritime Photobank

ample, the production of seafood for McDonalds can be switched to “sustainable” when its seafood production gets the stamp of approved by MSC but the sheer size of its production is never questioned? With an ever-increasing global overfishing problem, how can anyone convert to eating good fish, without looking at lowering (or giving up on) their overall level of consumption? Consuming sustainable fish means eating no fish or as little as possible. MSC has been very clever at marketing itself as the alternative many consumers are looking for. People are rightly concerned about the growing troubles the ocean is dealing with but they are being handed a greenwash solution which will ultimately only add to the problems.

There are no public guidelines or standards on what constitutes “sustainable” fish and companies such as MSC have no enforcement powers. Instead, it is an industry-led initiative which holds no public accountability whatsoever. Two fishing boats could catch the same fish, in the same waters, using the same type of fishing gear, one without an MSC certification, the other with. The certified fishermen will get a lot better price for its catch, after the initial investment needed to acquire the MSC stamp of approval. There is increasing evidence emerging that MSC is a failing system and that in their readiness to approve it, many environmental organizations are helping to give legitimacy to damaging fishing practices (such as “sustainable” bottom trawling) and in doing so, directly undermining the work of other organizations campaigning to get these practices outlawed.

The wider effect of MSC and other good fish initiatives is that many people settle with the notion that consuming fish is good and a viable alternative to eating meat. Studies in the UK have shown that due to an increase in the promotion of sustainable fish, the sale of many other types of seafood has also risen. We are giving the wrong signals. Every fish taken out of the ocean is one that won't come back. We are literally emptying the oceans of life, at such a rate that an international panel of marine scientists and fishing managers have concluded that if we carry on the way we are, there won't be anymore sea-

food to consume by the year 2048. Selling “sustainable” fish only adds to this pressure.

Yes, the picture is bleak. Even more bleak when you realize that almost half of the global fish catch is for industrial use, feeding pigs and poultry in the meat industry, salmon and shrimp in aquaculture and minks and foxes for the fur industry. A large percentage also ends up in pet food. This situation has gotten so out of hand that the pig is now the top predator of the oceans, closely followed by the chicken and cats in a close third spot. All of these animals now eat more sea creatures than any other marine species on earth. Cod in the Baltic Sea has been heavily overfished for many years, partly to feed mink in the Swedish and Finnish fur industry and the Danish trawler fleet catches almost entirely for the production of fish meal, a cheap way of feeding cattle. Even worse, fish meal is used as fertilizer in the agriculture industry and even accepted by some organic food certification standards.

It is clear that we cannot leave the protection of the oceans to those who are working on its rapid destruction. Politicians are united in their unwillingness to deal with these issues in a serious and adequate manner. Fishermen vote, fish don't. Politicians in regions where the fishing industry is strong and thriving won't be around in their jobs for long if they put forward effective conservation plans. Within the European Union (EU) the fishing industry lobby is incredibly strong. On numerous occasions, countries such as Spain, Italy and Malta (which are known to harbor a great number of illegal fishing activities) have used their veto powers to block new conservation proposals. We simply cannot leave this in the hands of politicians. The international waters where most of the fishing activity takes place is lawless. Far from the desks of bureaucrats and the territorial water of states, fishermen hunt and gather what they wish. With very limited accountability or enforcement, illegal activity is not just not acted on, it is practically encouraged. The bluefin tuna fishery in the Mediterranean has in recent years caught up to 6 times more fish than scientists recommended to be a sustainable level. With lawlessness

ruling the waves, what is there left to do?

Last summer a group of us who worked as crew members on the ships of Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd decided that more needs to be done to stop the destruction of the world's oceans. Up to this point, Greenpeace and Sea Shepherd were the only ones to take direct action at sea and both have done (and continue to do) an incredible job fighting injustices on the high seas and in many cases successfully blocking illegal fishing and whaling operations. However, the world's oceans are an area too big to properly cover with just two organizations and in Europe the situation is especially bad, with these waters now belonging to the most overfished and polluted in the world. In August 2010 we started a new marine activist organization the Black Fish. What started as a small group has grown into an organization which gained recognition quickly as it secured a number of successes in a short period of time.

The international trade in cetaceans such as dolphins and killer whales has been a focus for The Black Fish from the very start. This lucrative industry relies on wild caught animals, partly those taken at annual dolphin hunts in Japan and the Solomon Islands and exports them all over the world to dolphinariums, research facilities and entertainment parks. Within a week of the founding of The Black Fish an intensive campaign was started in Münster, Germany, for the closure of the local run-down dolphinarium and relocation of the four dolphins kept there. German organizations Whale and Dolphin Protection Forum and ProWal had been campaigning for a number of years for its closure but after we supported their efforts with a few weeks of pickets and actions, the owners of the dolphinarium announced to relocate the dolphins by the end of 2012 and close down the facility.

To make the link between European dolphinariums and the international trade it was decided to take on the dolphin traders on their home turf. Under the cover of darkness and after a week long surveillance operation, activists from the Black Fish swam out into the harbor of Taiji, Japan, the scene of the annual dolphin drive hunts. Arriving at the holding pens which hold animals, the nets of six of them were cut and an estimated ten

dolphins swam back out into open sea, escaping lifelong captivity. The action received worldwide attention and made it clear that the Black Fish wouldn't be another group just talking about issues but willing to take risks to do what is necessary to protect sea animals directly.

Back in the Netherlands, where by that time the Black Fish had opened an office, the Orca Coalition was founded, cooperating with six other organizations in a campaign for the release of orca Morgan. This young female killer whale was stranded on the Dutch coast in June 2010. She was cut off from her family and found malnourished. Although back to health within a couple of months, the Dutch dolphinarium at Harderwijk where she was held, refused to release her. Even more worrying was the fact that their expertise on what to do with the animal came right from SeaWorld, an American captive marine entertainment park corporation with a bad track record in their dealing with captive cetaceans. A large public media campaign was set up which received an overwhelming amount of interest, from both the Dutch and international press. Quite early on it became clear that the dolphinarium was acting illegally in their refusal to release the animal and planning to export her to an entertainment park at the Spanish island of Tenerife, where only 20 months earlier one of the orca trainers was killed when dragged down by an



The international Black Fish crew, Photos by the Black Fish



Projeto Tamar Brazil/Marine Photobank

Dead turtles in abandoned net





Crowds demand the release of orca Morgan, Dutch dolphinarium

“aggressive” orca named Keto.

It was decided that the coalition try other avenues before the more direct action approach would be necessary and a lawsuit was brought before the courts. The interesting thing was that this one case managed to achieve what so many organizations had tried before: for the first time ever a court blocked the transport of a captive animal to a SeaWorld facility. The dolphinarium was furious as the judge ordered the responsible Ministry to investigate the case independently and direct the dolphinarium to move the orca to a larger tank. The case put a spotlight on the dolphinarium, the trade and ultimately the unfortunate animal Morgan. Plans have now been drawn up by independent orca scientists and specialists on how to prepare for her actual release back into the wild. The responsible Minister has just announced his decision that the animal should be moved to the entertainment park. The Orca Coalition is preparing for more action to block her export.

The Black Fish has been busy with more than just the captivity campaigns. We realized from the start that if we were to take action at sea against destructive fisheries and whaling operations, we would need to raise quite a considerable amount of support and funds. We toured Sweden to raise awareness of the need for action and put on a series of events in The Netherlands and the UK. We went to Germany, networked with activists in Belgium and started researching the international trade in the endangered bluefin tuna. By now we realized this had to be one of our first focuses when it came to industrial fisheries in Europe as the fish is heavily threatened and many illegal fishing activities continue, with some countries continuing to hand out fishing subsidies to known perpetrators. We have been busy working on the publication of “Bluefin Bonanza,” a book exposing the poaching trade in the threatened fish, which is set to be published early next year.

We also opened for membership and started an application process for those interested in crewing with us. In a matter of weeks we secured the funds for our first direct action vessel: an ex-lifeguard rigid inflatable boat, which we renamed Zeno 1325 and are now busy preparing for its first action. Our planned campaign to protect the bluefin tuna from any further over-exploitation caught the interest from the Belgian organization How To Save The Bluefin, which decided to merge with the Black Fish



Photos provided by the Black Fish

Rallying for the release of the Münster dolphins

to build a stronger alliance in the fight for this magnificent creature. In addition to this we are working on an industrial fishing investigation, for which we have been donated a small workspace in Malmö, Sweden.

The fact that the Black Fish has grown to an international organization in a matter of months shows that a lot of people care for the oceans and the need to do something to stop it from being pillaged by corporate enterprise. We are a new generation that are taking on the whalers, fishermen, fish farmers and poachers that are destroying the very foundations of life on this earth. By keeping our focus within Europe we are able to do a lot with fewer resources. We have started small and are building from the grassroots. We need to start taking responsibility for what lies closer to home. For that bluefin tuna in the Mediterranean, cod in the Baltic, mackerel in the North East Atlantic and porpoise in the North Sea. For the whales that continue to be slaughtered by Norway and Iceland. For them we will stand our ground. Join us at [WWW.THEBLACKFISH.ORG](http://WWW.THEBLACKFISH.ORG)



As a small organization The Black Fish relies entirely on the hard work and support of volunteers: ordinary people with a passion for the marine environment that are looking to help make a difference in its protection. The Black Fish is currently expanding into new campaigns and we are looking for people to join our direct action team and future ship's crew. If you are committed to taking action for the protection of marine life in European seas and are able to dedicate time to work with us, please check out our website: [WWW.THEBLACKFISH.ORG/CREWING](http://WWW.THEBLACKFISH.ORG/CREWING)

We look forward to hearing from you!