

## **BOOSTING PUBLIC AWARENESS OF FISH**

By Ken Hinman

A decade ago my organization, the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, founded by sport fishermen, adopted the goal of making “Fish Conservation: An Environmental Priority for the ‘90s.” In many respects, ocean fish have, at the start of this new millenium, ascended to that higher plain. Most major environmental groups now have dynamic marine fisheries programs; a growing number of charitable foundations are bankrolling the cause; the mainstream news outlets cover some of the issues at least sporadically; and yes, there’s been notable progress on a number of fronts.

We’re right now turning a corner where many of our overfished species – 100 by the government’s last count - are at least pointed in the right direction, and some are on the road to recovery.

I believe we’re making progress for a number of reasons. The legions of professional fish conservationists are multiplying all the time. Fishermen are getting more and more conservation-minded, and more involved than ever before. We’re getting smarter as we learn from our failures. And we won’t give up.

All the same, I can’t help but feel that the Blue Revolution we’ve been working toward – when fish conservation ranks with other green issues in the public mind – has yet to hit the streets. I still find myself at social events – “And what do you do?” - wondering at how even such high profile issues as swordfish conservation, shark finning, and longline bycatch – so familiar to us “fish heads” – draw blank stares. And it’s not just the non-fishing public. I come across many anglers who know little about threats to species other than those they fish.

Lasting change, I’m still convinced, requires engaging the public in a lasting way, and that means a change in the way the majority of Americans view the ocean and its most dominant denizens, the fish. We still have a lot of seeds to sow. It takes more than just getting the word out. Presentation is everything. Over the years, I’ve done a lot of thinking about why it’s so difficult to sell fish to the public as something more than this evening’s dinner. Here are some of my collected thoughts, along with questions we all need to think more about as we angle for public support of fish conservation.

Fish Are Wildlife, Too?

Carl Safina, when he founded the Audubon Society's fisheries program 10 years ago, adopted the rallying cry, "fish are wildlife, too." "The last buffalo hunt is occurring on the ocean," he observed, "because conservationists and the general public have not yet recognized that fish are wildlife."

Sport fishermen have always viewed fish as wildlife (even if they cultivated another dichotomy, that between "game" and "non-game" species). Anglers were among the first marine fish conservationists, dating back to the first half of this century, just as hunters pioneered "wildlife" conservation around the same time. And yet the latter effort long ago evolved into a broader conservation movement; the National Wildlife Federation, for instance, may have begun as an alliance of hunters and fishermen united by the conservation ethic, but a majority of its current membership would probably describe themselves as environmentalists. Clearly, marine conservation has evolved at a slower pace. Why?

One possible explanation might be the demise of market hunting for wild animals on land (and for most fresh water fish, too) decades ago, while commercial harvests of marine fish have soared to record levels, as seafood has become a staple of the average American diet. For most people, fish are the only wild animals that appear on their table.

Most Americans eat fish regularly. How does this influence the public's thinking about fish, not as wild animals but as a food commodity, something that comes in a can or a cellophane wrapper in the freezer section of the supermarket? Does this cause the public to view fishermen as more akin to farmers than hunters, and fish as crops to be harvested, rather than a wild resource in need of conservation? Does it lead to a closer affinity with commercial fishermen than sport fishermen? Can the consumer's interest in fish be exploited on behalf of conservation, in that an abundant supply of high quality seafood depends on clean water, healthy coastal habitat and sustainable fishing practices?

### A Tale of Two Concepts

There is a distinction between "conservation" and "preservation," although the difference is not always clear. Conservation typically denotes wise or careful use of renewable natural resources to ensure their long-term sustainability for recreational, economic and ecological purposes. Preservation, on the other hand, has a much stricter meaning, very often protection from most human use, either to maintain the resource in a pristine, natural state or to rescue it from imminent danger (i.e., extinction). The public hears talk of conserving fish and preserving or protecting whales. How does the public interpret these two concepts, and how might it affect the way people view the relative importance of one task versus the other, one animal versus the other?

Similarly, to what extent is conveying to the public the urgent need to conserve fish populations harder than, say, the urgent need to preserve an endangered species?

I can't say how many times I've mentioned a fish in trouble and been asked, "Oh, I didn't know it was an endangered species?" Has the environmental movement, by employing preservation (of wilderness, endangered species, dolphin and other "charismatic megafauna") as a poster issue for the environmentalist cause, made this job even more difficult? In other words, have environmentalists inadvertently reinforced a crisis mentality among the general public, conveying that the time to care about wildlife is when it is endangered? If so, has it become necessary to tell people the sky is falling in order to get their attention?

Has the environmental movement also fostered the notion that an animal must be cute and cuddly, or highly intelligent (by human standards) in order to be worthy of our concern? Must a fish be portrayed as "Flipper with gills" in order to garner the level of public concern accorded to dolphins and whales? Basing conservation efforts on whether or not an animal appeals to us in an anthropomorphic way is not only egotistic and nonsensical, it is almost certainly counter-productive. It fosters the notion that the survival of some animals is more important than the survival of others, without regard to their respective roles in the ocean ecosystem. The good animal/bad animal distinction prompted the disastrous elimination of the predator population in North America.

On the other hand, there are and will likely always be fundamental differences in how society values various animals. Tuna will be eaten and dolphin will be off limits, even if the survival of the bluefin tuna, for example, is at least as threatened as some species of marine mammals.

What is the effect of the terminology used in fisheries management on the public perception of fisheries issues? Not just fishery management plans, but government press releases and even popular articles and the newsletters of conservation organizations are replete with such arcane terms as "resource," "stock," "harvest," "yield," "surplus," "biomass," "bycatch," "recruitment." Does the use of agricultural terminology reinforce the view of fish as crops? Is there an artificial distance between the public and fish created by the liberal use of euphemisms (e.g., caught or landed instead of killed)?

### Out of Sight, Out of Mind

With few exceptions, marine fish spend their entire lives below the surface of the sea, beyond the sight of humans. The non-fishing public sees living fish primarily on display in tropical fish tanks and aquaria, not in their natural environment. To put this limited familiarity into perspective, it is as if our experience with other wildlife were limited to caged parakeets and zoo animals. How does this affect the public perception and awareness of fish? Does it make it harder for people to appreciate the unique value of fish as wildlife?

Does the fact that fish live in "another world" color public opinion in other ways, for example, that we don't know how many fish there really are? Maybe they can't be driven to biological extinction, or if they were, would we know it? Following on this

point, have we really shaken the widespread belief that the sea holds an endless supply of fish?

Can the public be persuaded to care about animals they don't like? Efforts to conserve spiders and snakes, for instance, would probably not illicit an overwhelming response from the public, even though the ecological case for conserving them is well understood and easy to make. Negative perceptions of wildlife are often based on misinformation and so, for that matter, are some positive ones. Is the behavioral difference between, say, the lion ("noble king of the jungle") and the hyena ("skulking scavenger"), or between the eagle ("lord of the skies and symbol of freedom") and the vulture ("carrion-eating opportunist"), really enough to justify the vastly differing perceptions of one versus the other? No, but they are deeply ingrained nonetheless.

Do marine conservationists need to do the same kind of myth building to raise awareness of and concern for marine fish? "The big tunas, billfish and sharks are the lions and tigers of the sea," we say. The public is definitely more impressed with bigger, faster, stronger. What are the drawbacks of this approach? Should more emphasis be put on the unique role of fish in their ocean environment, the interdependence of marine life, and the value of biodiversity? But how are such complex concepts conveyed?

Within the conservation community, there is some unease about making the case for preserving animal and plant species based on their empirical value to humans, because it risks linking the reasons for protecting species to their usefulness to humans. This is ephemeral and indirectly may diminish the case for conserving species whose "usefulness" is not readily understood.

On the other hand, one of the most compelling arguments for conserving fish, and one that should be easily comprehended by nearly everyone, is their value as a source of protein, recreation, jobs and other social and economic benefits. Preserving the future of fishing and the fishing way of life is a principal motivation for conserving fish.

I don't have the answers to all these questions. What I do know is that the level of public awareness and concern for fish is not on a par with that for other marine life, such as whales, dolphins and sea turtles, even though the over-exploitation of so many fish populations poses a greater threat to the planet. We all have a lot to gain by overcoming this perception.