

TampaEn Garde For Swordfish  
by  
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The first thing Vikki Spruill did when she went looking for a fish to save did not have to do with fish at all.

It had to do with people.

Spruill is the executive director of SeaWeb, a non-profit organization whose motto is "The ocean is in trouble, and, therefore, so are we." In 1996, her organization began researching a campaign that would encourage consumers to temporarily boycott one of the dozens of critically overfished species in U.S. coastal waters.

"Our early public opinion research indicated the way to engage the public interest is through the food on their plate," Spruill said.

The segment of the public whose interest Spruill wanted to engage was a well-off, well-educated group, roughly 30 to 45 years old. These people are voters and decision makers, Spruill said. In demographic shorthand, Spruill calls them "the public-radio crowd."

To connect with this group, Spruill, who has an extensive background in public relations and advertising, knew that she needed a certain kind of fish. A poster fish, if you will.

Shrimp and salmon rank at the top of the most popular seafoods, but half of the shrimp and salmon sold in the United States are farm-raised, tempering their status as overfished. Besides, shrimp lack a certain weightiness.

"We wanted something majestic," said Spruill.

No. 3 on the popularity list, according to Spruill, was swordfish, whose firm-fleshed steaks had become a mainstay of fashionable restaurants across the country.

Most importantly for Spruill's purposes, the swordfish, specifically the North Atlantic variety, was one of the 86 overfished species in U.S. coastal waters.

Although no one considered North Atlantic swordfish to be the most depleted species in the sea, marine scientists were of the opinion that decades of indiscriminate long-line fishing in the North Atlantic had decimated the stocks of swordfish. Juvenile fish were being caught before they had had a chance to breed, and so a normally prolific breeder (females lay millions of eggs several times a year) was unable to replenish itself.

Despite the fact that swordfish was neither the most popular nor the most threatened species in the sea, in January it became the focus of the "Give Swordfish a Break" campaign, a proposed yearlong moratorium on eating North Atlantic swordfish.

Simply put, SeaWeb's marketing indicated that swordfish - not bluefin tuna or orange roughy or grouper - is that felicitous point at which consumer demographics and conservation science intersect.

If Spruill's marketing instincts were correct, then she could expect that conscientious consumers of the East Coast power corridor between Washington and New York would renounce a favorite restaurant dish. In so doing, their principled and very public stand would shame federal regulators into enacting tougher laws to protect the swordfish.

For all the strategizing, though, a big question remained:

Would anybody really care about a cold-blooded animal, especially one that goes so well with a nice bottle of sauvignon blanc?

An affinity for fins

Generally speaking, people do not experience the kind of warm feelings toward fish that they do for a furry animal with dewy, front-facing eyes. Fish are not cuddly. They are seen as a commodity.

For this reason, people are more inclined to muster outrage over the bludgeoning of seal pups than to oppose the killing of millions of fish, which, according to popular belief, do not even feel pain.

The reason for such divergent views of wildlife is simple, said Carl Safina, director of the Living Oceans Program for the National Audubon Society. Consumers "only see them dead," he said.

"The analogy would be to get people to care about birds if they'd only seen them in the poultry department," Safina said. "They don't see (the fish) in the ocean, where they are superb hunters, highly migratory, very interesting animals."

To generate empathy for swordfish requires a different tack. A couple of them.

Cuddly is out, so you play to the animal's unique characteristics. In this case, its majesty, as Spruill put it.

At a press conference SeaWeb held recently at Boca restaurant in Ybor City, a free-standing replica of a several-hundred-pound swordfish was on display, its sharp bill pointed toward the cameras. Lisa Speer, who represents the National Resources Defense Council, which is co-sponsoring the campaign, said that the swordfish, a solitary, fast-swimming predator, would be the sea-based equivalent of a bear.

The message would seem to be this is not your average schooling fish. It has character, nobility even.

The second strategy borrows a rhetorical device from traditional animal rights campaigns and puts it to use in a conservation effort.

"We are catching and eating babies!" reads a letter sent to "fellow chefs" by Washington, D.C., restaurateur Nora Pouillon, one of the first chefs to join the campaign. The tone is dramatic, the Audubon Society's Safina acknowledged, but not misleading.

"A lot of people don't understand what 'juvenile' means," Safina said, adding that talking in management jargon does nothing to communicate the severity of the issue.

"You don't want them to think of the issue the way they already think of the fish, which is as a big, cold, dead, scaly thing," Safina said.

Importantly, the swordfish campaign diverges intentionally from the contentious, radical activism for which groups such as People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals have become known. The SeaWeb literature stresses that the campaign is not a boycott, just a break so that a swordfish recovery plan can be implemented and stocks can regenerate.

"I don't want to be positioned as a wacko animal rights activist," Spruill said.

#### Reworking menus

Five months before the campaign was launched, SeaWeb polled slightly more than a thousand people to find out how the issue resonated with them. The results were encouraging.

Pollsters told people that "most swordfish now served in restaurants and sold in stores are caught when they are babies, which makes it even more difficult for the species to reproduce."

With that information, two-thirds of the people said they would be at least "very likely" to boycott swordfish. More than half the people thought a government-imposed ban was a good idea.

"Americans are willing to defend swordfish," the report concluded rather broadly. (By the way, Americans won't defend the fishermen. Only 7 percent of the people polled cared that a ban might harm the people who bring the fish to market.)

Passion for the cause, though, diminished by half when people were asked whether they would request that their grocery store or favorite restaurant not serve the fish. People generally do not campaign across the counter, and this reluctance jibes with anecdotal evidence from retailers.

When customers do express concern, said Linda Whaley Bublitz, manager of Whaley's Market in South Tampa, it has less to do with what type of fish they are eating than it does with what the fish might have eaten.

"The main concern is that there may be something wrong with it. If there's a Red Tide out, or if there's worms in the grouper," Bublitz said. "They're more concerned with health issues than environmental issues."

Like many other seafood retailers, Whaley's Market (which serves Spruill's target audience) continues to sell swordfish (\$ 13.99 a pound), insisting that the fish they buy wholesale are not runts.

Those restaurants that have agreed not to serve swordfish acknowledge a financial motivation to their good works. Even if diners do not lead the charge, it still behooves restaurant chefs to guarantee a fresh supply of entrees in the future. The success of the campaign may rest then with the person picking out the dinner menu, rather than the person picking up the dinner tab.

"Who is the consumer of swordfish? Restaurants," said Dwight Otis, a Tampa chef who quit serving swordfish at his restaurants five years ago. "To address it from an industry point of view is better. We're talking about money."

Red Lobster, with 684 seafood restaurants in the United States and Canada, quit buying North Atlantic swordfish more than a year ago. Instead, the company buys swordfish from other fisheries, namely the Pacific Ocean, where the stocks are not so depleted. The impulse was not principle, but profit.

"Initially, it was probably a function of price and availability," said Rick Van Warner, vice president of media relations for Darden Restaurants Inc., which owns Red Lobster. "We have not been involved in the debate and have wanted to stay out of it as much as possible."

SeaWeb has not enjoyed the participation of chains such as Red Lobster, but the organization was heartened recently when Royal Caribbean Cruises Ltd., which uses 20 tons of swordfish a year, agreed to take the fish off its menu. Meanwhile, Bon Appetit magazine (there's that well-heeled demographic again) announced it would stop printing swordfish recipes. But previously published recipes are available still from the magazine's Web site.

So the battle is being fought for the most part in small kitchens by chefs such as Boca's Jon Eric Kern. Until a few months ago, Kern was serving 150 dinners a week of bronzed swordfish (bronzing is similar to blackening, but the seasoning is rubbed on the fish before it is seared in butter rather than after).

"It was a great dish," said Kern, 34. But he had noticed for some time that the swordfish he was buying at the restaurant was getting smaller. In fish-market lingo, a fish that size is known as a pup, according to Audubon magazine.

"I was ignorant to it, to be honest with you," Kern said. "I didn't know what size they had to be to reproduce."

He found out in an article in Time magazine in early January and soon joined the boycott, which numbers about 85 chefs nationwide. He and Dwight Otis are the most vocal chefs in the Tampa area to sign up.

"We put swordfish on your plate," Otis said. "Unbeknownst to us, we created this problem."

Now they want to make amends.

"The solution is finding alternative fish out there," Otis said. "We don't always have to sell black grouper or red grouper. We can cook with cobia, or other species of snapper other than red snapper."

Need a sea change

It is not easy to do the right thing all the time.

At the recent press conference held by SeaWeb in Ybor City, a table of appetizers was laid out for those who attended.

There was seaweed pasta with tofu, and boiled peanuts dressed with truffle-infused soy sauce. There was saffron sweet rice rolled with chile and garlic pickled black beans, cilantro and kohlrabi. And there, right in the middle of it all, was a dish called "brioche flatbread wrapped around barbecued veal spare rib."

Spare rib from a calf.

Just a baby.

Times researcher Carolyn Hardnett contributed to this report