



Op-Ed

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Majestic Marlin Needs Our Help to Survive

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Imagine turning on the nightly news and seeing a story about the slaughter of 12,000 lions in Africa. Or 12,000 tigers. Or 12,000 wolves. It would be upsetting wouldn't it? Could you imagine the outrage?

The organization that I lead is recognized worldwide as the world record keeper of the largest fish caught on rod and reel. And fortunately, I am glad to report that many of these fish are photographed and released to swim again.

However, there is one world record to which I must, unhappily, draw to your attention. Our nation holds the world record for importing the most marlin and sailfish. According to the United States Food and Drug Administration (FDA), the United States earned the dubious distinction of being the No. 1 importer of marlin and sailfish for the table -- importing an average 1,260 metric tons of billfish (marlin, sailfish or spearfish), or the equivalent of about 12,000 billfish, at an average of 200 lbs. each, between 2003 – 2006. Despite the fact that our country has stiff bans on the commercial fishing and importation of marlin that roam the Atlantic Ocean, we do not have such a ban on marlin and other billfish that roam the Pacific and Indian Oceans.

Collectively called “billfish”, marlin, sailfish and spearfish are truly some of the most magnificent species on our planet. Weighing up to nearly a ton, these fish are among the top predators within our oceans. Their sleek silvery bodies, distinguished by their spear-like noses (an extension of the upper jaw and nasal cavity), roam the oceans feeding on smaller fish and keeping our marine ecosystems in balance; much like lions, tigers and wolves do on land.

And what happened to those 12,000 marlin, sailfish and spearfish? We ate them. At restaurants as marlin steak, or at a sushi bar as a sashimi selection, or on our grills at

home, after we purchased billfish at our local seafood retailer. It's not a meal that most of us seek out, like our desire to visit a restaurant that serves really great New York Strip steaks. It's often an impulse buy, because when we see it on the menu, it seems exotic, and we assume that it is a sustainable species.

But, here's the problem: Billfish populations are crashing worldwide because of the overharvesting of these great animals. According to various studies, billfish and the populations of other top predators may have declined by 90 percent in the last 50 years. Marine biologists such as Dr. Russell Nelson, believe that at the rate billfish are being caught by commercial fishing fleets, marlin, sailfish and spearfish may become as rare as the American buffalo 100 years ago, or as the bald eagle, 40 years ago. Unlike these and other endangered species, because of the size and nature of billfish, they can't be farmed like other species, such as salmon, catfish or tilapia, nor can they be preserved in large aquariums or zoos.

Back to the dinner plate. Most of the marlin and sailfish that appear on American dinner plates are sold to restaurants and seafood retailers in lots containing many other fish – tuna, mahi mahi, and swordfish. These fish are sold to you as “the seafood specials of the day.”

Savvy restaurateurs, such as Wolfgang Puck Companies, which operate well-known restaurants such as Spago and Cut, are aware that billfish, as well as many other species, are imperiled and have already made the commitment to support sustainable seafood. In other words, they've already gone “marlin free.” But, there are many other less sophisticated or smaller independent restaurants that either don't know about how imperiled marlin actually are, or are forced to buy marlin as part of a large lot of fish that they buy from a seafood wholesaler.

Here is where you come in. I invite American consumers to join the Take Marlin Off the Menu Campaign, a nationwide campaign launched by my organization, the IGFA, the National Coalition for Marine Conservation, and The Billfish Foundation, three leading marine conservation organizations.

The next time you enter a restaurant and see marlin on the menu, please politely suggest that the restaurant take marlin off the menu and go “marlin free.” Know of a favorite restaurant or seafood retailer that already is marlin free? Let us know and we'll promote that business on our web site, <http://www.takemarlinoffthemenu.org>.

If consumers in our country can save 12,000 marlin, sailfish and spearfish per year – that's 12,000 billfish roaming the seas and doing they're part to keep our ocean ecosystems healthy and in balance.

In today's frenetic world, it feels like there are a lot of things out of our control. But this is one thing, like switching the traditional incandescent light bulbs in your house to fluorescent light bulbs, that you can do that can have an enormous, positive impact on our world.

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