

PLANET FOOD

May 2002

PRAWNS

Prawns is a generic term including what we know as 'shrimp'. However, in the US, the generic term used is 'shrimp', which includes what we know as prawns.

1. EDITORIAL – PRAWNS

"Why the hell can't I get a prawn that I can eat with a clean conscience?"
Greenpeace Oceans Campaigner

I love eating prawns but they are one of the very few foods that I have chosen to boycott. Whether farmed or trawled they are one of the most environmentally destructive foods that we eat.



The thing that makes me really mad is that it is quite easy to find really low quality junk food, which includes prawns. Ready made, pre-prepared plastic sandwiches full of prawns and 'mayo' - most of us would be none the wiser if it was prawn-flavoured paper. Prawns in convenience foods and at motorway cafes sitting on stale lettuce leaves with globs of pink mayonnaise. If we are going to eat them, we should make sure we are really appreciating them and dish them up as the luxury they are.

Not to be too self righteous, I will eat prawns if someone serves them for dinner and cooks them in a manner they deserve. But I won't buy them! And I try to persuade organisations where I go for meetings to send a message to their caterers that prawn sandwiches and the like should come off the menu.

This month I will be looking at why prawns are so environmentally and socially damaging and how it might be possible to get ones with less of an impact.

2. WHAT'S WRONG WITH PRAWNS?

Prawn trawling

Nearly all wild caught prawns are captured by trawl fishing. According to Greenpeace's Ocean Campaigner, Matthew Gianni, this industry stands head and shoulders above all other fisheries in terms of its environmental destruction and its by-catch.

By catch is all the fish and other species that are caught alongside the target species and then generally discarded dead or dying back into the sea – effectively wasted. Although prawns account for only about 1-2% of the total world fish catch, they account for about one third of

the world by-catch. And that is not including the turtles or sea mammals that may be caught as well.

The key problem is that the nets for prawn trawling inevitably have small holes, which means that very few fish can escape. In more Northern fisheries for cold water prawns, they have designed a rigid net system called a 'grid'. This means that the holes remain open and lessens the by-catch. And in areas where catching large quantities of turtles in prawn nets has been a real problem, some fishermen – but by no means all – have introduced, turtle extrusion nets.

The other key concern about any sort of trawling is the damage it does to the sea bottom. They literally scrape along the ocean floor, tearing up the coral and rich sea life that resides there.

In the Pacific Northwest they have a marine prawn that grows near the coast and can be harvested from shrimp pots, lowered over the side of boats. This has to be the best system for wild caught prawns but there are no-where near enough to satisfy demand.

Clearly there is lots that can be done to improve the existing system, but unless we cut back on the amount of prawns we eat, it will be impossible to meet demand in any sort of sustainable way. The escalation of prawn farming, which has been dubbed 'the pink goldrush' has substantially increased demand – by about 10-fold in the last decade – whilst creating a whole raft of serious problems of its own.

The pink goldrush

Did you know?

There are over 250,000 hectares of abandoned prawn farms worldwide.

Thailand is big on prawn farming. Other countries in Asia have followed their example. And the industry has spread to South and Central America. Their sights are now set on Africa, where it is suggested they have cheap land, cheap labour and clear waters. Just right for the 'slash and burn' approach of the prawn farming industry.

One of the biggest impacts of prawn farms is destruction of mangroves. These are coastal areas that are extremely rich in wildlife – like rainforests – and which also act as the nursery for much of the surrounding marine life. Destroying mangroves means destroying coral, crabs and spawning fish as well as vital fresh water and farm land for the local populations.

Prawn farmers will often come into an area, set up their farm, make lots of money over a short period and then leave. The intensive nature of the farms means that wastes build up, disease becomes rampant and it becomes uneconomic after a period of just a few years. Escaped prawns are an issue too and they spread disease to wild populations.

This is not just an ecological disaster but a social one too. People living close to abandoned prawn farms can no longer harvest rice and other local produce because they have been left with a salinated wasteland. In some areas is trucked in from hundreds of miles away, when previously they had a plentiful supply from wells. And generally, it is not the local people who benefit from the short term boom. Profits are siphoned out of the area – often out of the country – into the hands of a few wealthy prawn barons.

The rich pickings from the ‘pink goldrush’ have resulted in gangster-style feuds. Out-spoken critics of the prawn farming industry have been killed for their pains.

But just as with wild prawns, there are a few small-scale initiatives being set up, which show how it can be done. In some areas they have set up ‘closed-loop’ aquaculture, where the water is re-circulated and purified. They may produce, not just prawns, but crabs and other shell-fish too. And other more traditional systems, which are low intensity, is where they let the tidal ebb and flow, bringing in the nutrients needed and wash out the wastes. Clearly this means that the populations cannot be too dense or the system would be overloaded.

Where do we go from here?

Clearly this is not a good starting point. The introduction of prawn farming and large-scale prawn trawling has meant that prawns are treated as nothing particularly special. I think we all have a duty to return prawns to their luxury status. For those of us that like prawns, we could select one day a year when we allow ourselves a really special treat – cooking and preparing prawns with the reverence they deserve. Even so, we should try to buy the most sustainable ones available – ask your retailer what they are doing about it!

PRAWN CONTACTS

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