Carl Safina's *Song for the Blue Ocean* is an elegy for the Earth's imperiled seas, its vanishing fish species and dying coral reefs. Writing with passion and poetry, Safina warns us that we have precious little time left to save the world's oceans and, by extension, ourselves. "When people speak of saving the oceans, I offer this," he writes. "We need the seas more than they need us."

Safina, director of the National Audubon Society's Living Oceans Program, takes his readers on a global journey to learn—in the words of fishermen, farmers, and scientists—why our fisheries are endangered. His travels begin in the Northeast, where the bottom has fallen out of the fishing industry. Many species, including the bluefin tuna, yellowfin tuna, blue marlin, and swordfish, are at the lowest levels in history.

On the Atlantic coast, the prize catch is bluefin tuna. The population of bluefin has declined nearly 90 percent over the past two decades as a result of overfishing by longliners, huge fishing vessels dragging as many as 30 miles of lines and hooks. And no wonder the bluefin is so popular, says Safina, for the fish is worth more "than any other animal on the planet, elephants and rhino included." A half-ton bluefin can easily bring $50 or more a pound on the Japanese market. In fact, one bluefin recently sold for $83,500 in Tokyo.

Bluefin tuna is an international commodity, sought by vessels from Canada and Honduras to Russia and Japan. And while fishermen, conservationists, and politicians argue over the best way to control bluefin fishing and the money it produces, the species is being hunted out of existence.

In the Pacific Northwest, the species most at risk is the salmon. The commercial salmon catch declined more than 90 percent in the last 20 years, putting 72,000 fishermen out of work. And the problem is not just overfishing. Loss of habitat from logging, farming, and hydroelectric dams is also destroying salmon populations.

Logging, for instance, is causing the destruction of the region's remaining old-growth forest, with its cool, shaded streams laden with deadfall. Without these streams to return to for spawning, salmon can't survive.

Similarly, farming, with its miles of irrigation ditches, is siphoning off water from streams where salmon spawn.

The great hydroelectric dams of the Northwest have also decimated salmon populations. The dams prevent salmon from traveling up the rivers, and they catch the fish in their turbines.

As a result, few of the salmon breeding populations that once were abundant in the Northwest exist today. They have been replaced by short-lived fish raised in hatcheries at great cost. Raising salmon in hatcheries also reduces genetic diversity and contributes to many physiological and behavioral abnormalities in the fish.

Safina reports on a community that has had some success in reclaiming its own resources. The Deer Creek Watershed Conservancy—a group of property owners in the Sierra foothills of California—has organized to protect its watershed "in perpetuity for fish and wildlife...and the future generations who will be making their living off the land."

The group has been able to get legislation passed that prohibits dams from interfering with the free flow of the creek and its spring salmon runs. It has also
committed to preventing timber clearcuts and protecting riparian areas on public and private land within the watershed. Efforts like this offer the best hope for saving species, Safina says.

The last stop on Safina’s global tour of fisheries is the Far Pacific, where the tropical waters off the southern Philippines and Indonesia yield the most diverse marine life in the world. “Amid the biological chaos of our times,” Safina writes, “I wanted to find a place still full of abundance.”

But even here, marine habitat is suffering. The huge reefs are dying, victims of greed and a rapacious global economy. Increasing tourism and development on the islands have led to silt and sewage runoff into the bays. The algae that feed on the runoff are covering and destroying the magnificent but fragile coral reefs that are home to thousands of exotic fish and mollusks. The reefs are also being crushed by blasts of dynamite used to flush out fish from the reef’s crevices, and they are being killed by the cyanide used to stun and capture the fish that hide there.

Those profiting from the destruction of marine habitat—tropical fish importers and live-fish brokers in Asia—live far from the scene. Local fishermen, however, who barely eke out a subsistence living, often die from cyanide exposure, dynamite blasts, and diving accidents.

Minoru Ueki, a Palauan elder who is interviewed by Safina, mourns the loss of his Pacific island culture to global economic forces:

In Palauan society, before money, we always had enough from the ocean or the land. Now people can make money by taking more than they need, by cutting down all the trees or catching all the fish. Money is threatening our cultural stability. We are choking off our future, including our future options for making money.

Unlike many environmentalists, Safina doesn’t fault fishers, loggers, or farmers, but the ravenous appetite of consumers in developed nations. Safina says we continue to worship free trade as the new global religion, even though it threatens our own survival.

“Money extends the reach of markets and takes the insularity, circularity, and recycling of wealth out of local economies,” he says. “It throws trade open to vast areas of geography.” He claims the global economy uses people as its fuel, consuming human potential and leaving a scarred environment in its path.

Yet Safina hasn’t given up hope. “Again and again,” he says, “I am seeing that the key to survival is enlightened communities of natural resource use.” If there is to be any salvation for the ocean and its inhabitants, it lies in the ability of local communities to effect a kind of sea change. Local activist groups like the Deer Creek Watershed Conservancy, with its commitment to thinking globally but acting locally, may be our best chance to restore the planet.


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