

Op-Ed Contributor

Cat Got Your Fish?

By PAUL GREENBERG
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MY cat Coco died recently. Actually we euthanized him to alleviate his suffering from cancer. And while this was a sad moment, it was made less sad because Coco's death also alleviated ever so slightly the suffering of the sea.



Ward Schumaker

Coco, like most American cats, ate fish. And a great deal of them — more in a year than the average African human, according to Jason Clay at the World Wildlife Fund. And unlike the chicken or beef Coco also gobbled up, all those fish were wild animals, scooped out of the sea and flown thousands of carbon-belching miles to reach his little blue bowl.

The use of wild fish in animal feed is a serious problem for the world's food systems. Around a third of all wild fish caught are "reduced" into fish meal and fish oil. And yet most of the outrage about this is focused not on land-based animals like Coco but on other fish — namely farm-raised fish.

This is understandable. Ever since the Stanford economist Rosamond Naylor concluded in a 2000 paper in the journal *Nature* that it took three pounds of wild fish to provide enough food to grow one pound of farmed salmon, environmentalists have been apoplectic. They argue that the removal of wild "forage" fish threatens to starve whales, seals and other predators; that anchovies, mackerel and other "pelagic forage fish" should be used to feed humans; and that feed made from wild fish can give farm-raised fish higher levels of contaminants. As a result of all these issues, ocean preservationists have focused their ire on salmon farming. But in doing so they diverted attention from another problem of equal importance: the role played by those land-based creatures that also put their muzzles in the fish meal trough.

The pet food industry now uses about 10 percent of the global supply of forage fish. The swine industry consumes 24 percent of fish meal and oil — fish oil being considered the best way to wean piglets. Poultry meanwhile takes as much as 22 percent, which means that even when Coco ate chicken, indirectly he was still eating fish. (It's worth pointing out, too, that the PCBs that concentrate in farmed salmon similarly concentrate in pigs and chickens. A PCB is the same persistent carcinogen no matter what form of flesh delivers it to the human digestive tract.)

Meanwhile, the aquaculture industry has taken the criticisms levied against it seriously. Through a combination of selective breeding of more efficient animals, the use of fish meal substitutes from soy, and greater efforts to retrieve uneaten pellets of fish meal at fish farms, the ratio of pounds of wild fish required

for a pound of farmed salmon has dropped considerably since 2004. Yes, the overall number of salmon being farmed and the subsequent demand for wild fish meal from salmon farmers are rising, but they are clearly striving toward some kind of smaller footprint at least on an impact-per-animal basis.

I am not advocating the salmon industry be given a free pass. It still has work to do, particularly with limiting the escape of those efficient, selectively bred farmed fish into the wild. But salmon naturally eat other fish, while terrestrial livestock and pets eat them because humans have deemed it commercially expedient.

If we are serious about curtailing our impact on the oceans, we should insist that land-based farm animals stick to land-grown feed. Some moves in this direction have already taken place. The United States' national organics standards now require producers to keep fish meal use to a minimum.

But limiting terrestrial use of fish meal in our country is not enough. Fish meal and oil are now a booming international commodity. The rising demand, particularly from Asia, is fueling a perilous trend to "reduce" bigger and more valuable wild fish into pig, chicken and fish feed.

If we are to stop this devastating practice, we must step up our research to find alternatives. Indeed, the Obama administration, in search of "shovel

ready" projects for the forthcoming stimulus package, would be well advised to consider programs like the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's research initiative to develop fish meal and oil substitutes from algae, agricultural byproducts and other nonfish sources. No doubt the swine and poultry industries will claim that fish substitutes are too far off and that cutting out fish meal and fish oil is not economically feasible. But similar arguments were once made by the agricultural interests that relied on whales for fertilizer.

As for pets like Coco, alternatives already exist. Several companies now make vegan cat food, though owners of vegan cats find they must supplement their pets' diets with Vitamin A, Vitamin B12, niacin and other nutrients. But those who feel a vegan cat goes against nature (so says the A.S.P.C.A.) might rethink a pet's potential footprint before acquiring one.

A carnivore, be it a cat, a dog or a salmon, is a heavy burden for the environment and should not be brought under human care lightly. In my family, this has become a topic of debate as we consider our next animal. Coco was an interesting and unique creature, and I argue that he cannot be replaced. To me, a vegetarian substitute is seeming more and more appealing. Lately, I've had my eye on a guinea pig.

Paul Greenberg is the author of a forthcoming book on the future of fish.