

# Our Approach to Seafood Sustainability

## *Why It Matters: Wild Fish Stocks Are Under Pressure*

Seafood is the main source of protein for more than 1 billion people worldwide; another 3 billion count on seafood for up to 20%<sup>2</sup> of the protein in their diets. And in the United States in particular, demand continues to skyrocket as consumers heed nutritionists’ advice to eat seafood for better health.

Scores of studies point to seafood as one of the healthiest foods one can eat. The fatty acids in fish have been shown to reduce the risk of heart disease, stroke, dementia and autoimmune diseases such as Crohn’s and rheumatoid arthritis.

Global demand for seafood is rising so fast that wild-caught species simply cannot keep pace. According to the United Nations’ Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), most of the stocks of the top 10 fish species (representing about 30 percent of world marine captures) were either fully exploited or overexploited in 2007.<sup>3</sup>

A depleted fishery has huge environmental, economic and social ramifications. When one fish species struggles, an entire marine ecosystem can suffer. Fishermen, and fishing communities, struggle financially, as do the businesses that sell the seafood to consumers. And for many impoverished individuals around the world, there may not be alternative sources of protein that they can easily access and afford.

### Global Fish Trade

**Total Global Seafood Purchases:** \$60 billion a year

**Seafood Marketplace:** Nearly 200 countries that supply the global seafood marketplace

**Commercial Products\*:** More than 800 species of fish, shellfish, mollusks

**World Population:\*\***  
 2010 Population: 6.8 billion  
 2050 Projected Population: 9+ billion

\* Source: www.fishbase.org

\*\*Source: United Nations and U.S. Bureau of the Census estimates

### Global Fish Stocks

Of the 600 marine stocks monitored by the FAO:

- 17% of species are overexploited
- 7% are depleted
- 1% are recovering from depletion
- 52% are fully exploited
- 20% are moderately exploited or underexploited
- 3% are underexploited

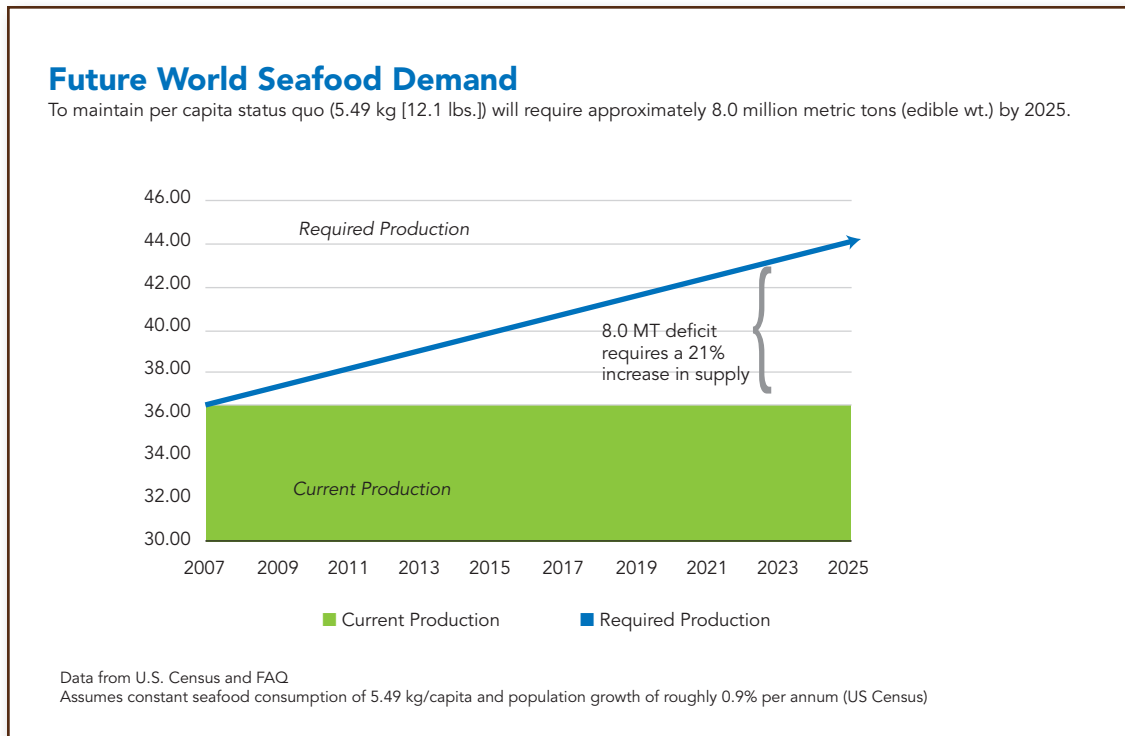
Source: FAO

<sup>2</sup> Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) – The State of World Fisheries & Aquaculture (SOFIA, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> The FAO defines these terms as follows. “Fully exploited” means the fishery is operating at or close to an optimal yield level, with no expected room for further expansion. “Overexploited” means the fishery is being exploited at or above a level which is believed to be sustainable in the long term, with no potential room for further expansion and a higher risk of stock depletion/collapse. “Depleted” means catches are well below historical levels, irrespective of the amount of fishing effort exerted.

Global seafood demand is expected to jump to 144 million tons per year by 2025 – a huge increase from the 94 million tons in 2007. Yet, the amount of seafood harvested from the oceans has remained flat since the late 1980s, at about 85 million to 90 million tons a year. Figure 1 illustrates expected trends in future world seafood supply in relation to projected per capita demand. (We derived these figures from FAO fish capture data and U.S. Census Bureau statistics on the increasing world population.)

FIGURE 1



Certainly the overfishing of desirable species is a major contributor to the problem. So is illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing. But these are not the only causes of fish population declines. Historically, in many parts of the world, human impacts such as coastline development have severely affected coral reef ecosystems<sup>4</sup> and other sensitive habitats, such as mangroves, where young fish live before they venture out into the open ocean.<sup>5</sup> In addition, pollution runoff has harmed fish populations and even created large “dead zones” in some bodies of water.<sup>6</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Christopher Delgado, et al., *Fish to 2020: Supply and Demand in Changing Global Markets* (Washington, DC: International Food Policy Research Institute, 2003).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

## *What We're Doing: Strengthening Policies, Seeking Alternatives*

Seafood sustainability isn't new for Darden. We've been passionate about this issue for 40 years – well before “sustainability” was a household term.

When Red Lobster was founded in 1968, high-quality seafood was available only to the wealthy, or to diners lucky enough to live along the coasts. Red Lobster Founder Bill Darden figured out how to make seafood available and affordable for all, no matter where they lived. As our company grew, we increasingly recognized the importance of sustainable fisheries not only to our business and our company's bottom line, but also to our global community.

In the 1970s and early 1980s, for example, our then-president, Joe Lee, helped coordinate a team that collaborated with the United Nations to help draft the Law of the Seas Treaty, which was designed to protect the world's oceans and marine life from overfishing.

But early conservation efforts went only so far. So we took action, strengthening our policies and changing our purchasing practices regarding wild-caught and aquacultured fish. For example:

- ❖ We currently do not serve certain species such as Chilean sea bass, orange roughy or any type of shark, as these species are overfished at present. We are constantly monitoring scientific information on the changing conditions of fish stocks to evaluate whether we should remove other species from our menus, too.
- ❖ We are committed to purchasing wild harvested and aquacultured species from sustainable sources. Darden utilizes the input and expertise of the New England Aquarium to guide our sustainable choices. For aquaculture, we also rely on the best practice standards of the Global Aquaculture Alliance. (See below for more information.)
- ❖ We established the Darden Environmental Trust (as part of the Darden Restaurants Foundation) to fund projects that protect marine life. To date, the trust has donated more than \$5 million to various marine preservation projects, including one that was instrumental in conservation efforts to protect the Kemp's ridley sea turtle, one of the most critically endangered sea turtle species in the world.

### **Our Seafood Sustainability Promise**

At Darden, we are committed to doing the right thing when it comes to seafood sustainability. For example:

- We are committed to purchasing wild-harvested and aquacultured species from sustainable sources.
- We consult regularly with respected scientists to ensure we stay abreast of changes to ocean ecosystems and to stay current with best sustainability practices.
- We use our influence to encourage the industry to follow more sustainable practices.

To make a sustainable seafood purchase, a buyer must consider multiple factors for a given species, including where and how it was caught and how it was transported. For example, some species of fish, like swordfish, live all over the world; the species may be overfished in one ocean but not in another. For farmed species, a buyer must also consider what the fish were fed and where that food came from, as well as the impacts of the aquaculture practices on land and water.

We have been working with the New England Aquarium – a global leader in marine conservation and one of the premier aquariums in the United States – to develop what we call a “Sustainable Seafood Dashboard.” (See below for a screenshot of the opening page.) The Dashboard is designed to provide the most current and detailed environmental, conservation and scientific data about wild-capture and aquacultured species, highlighting how a species is caught, where it is captured and whether it is in jeopardy, among other issues. The Dashboard is intended to inform Darden’s seafood buyers regarding sustainability issues and to encourage a two-way dialogue between Darden and the Aquarium, in order to move forward on matters of seafood sustainability.

### Seafood Safety

At Darden, food safety is our highest priority.

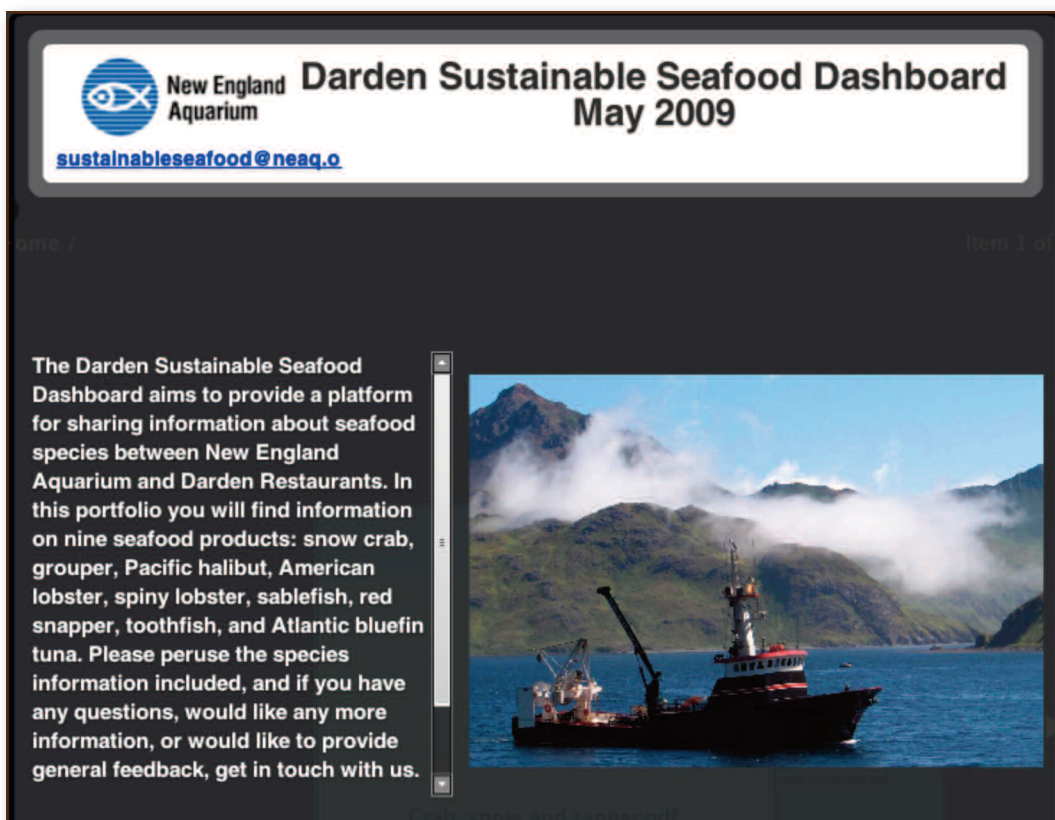
We have a team of highly trained seafood quality and safety specialists who inspect millions of pounds of fish and shellfish each year.

Our seafood evaluations consist of physical, organoleptic (i.e., do they look and smell fresh?), chemical and microbiological tests, and we go above and beyond standard testing for industrial pollutants such as mercury and polychlorinated biphenyls (PCBs).

For a detailed look at our food safety practices and procedures, see the [Our Food](#) section.

In developing the tool, members of our seafood purchasing department have been meeting with Aquarium scientists to discuss the environmental, economic and commercial implications of our wild-capture purchases. The Dashboard will not provide a simple “yes” or “no” approach to purchasing a particular species; rather, it aims to further educate our buyers about the factors that should be considered to make a responsible purchase.

Lydia Bergen, the Aquarium’s Director of Conservation, said the Dashboard has also been educational for the Aquarium, as it provides a deeper awareness of the business considerations, including quality, cost and availability of supply, that impact purchasing decisions at a large company like Darden.



“We understand the biology of the fish and the rules and regulations of fisheries management, so we have certain insights into how things work,” Bergen says. “But Darden has the relationships with the vendors, so they have different insights. Our hope is that we can work together to share information so we can develop some workable solutions.”

(See more on our partnership with the New England Aquarium below.)

We have also placed particular emphasis on protecting lobster fisheries; after all, it’s the iconic namesake of one of our most popular restaurants. Among our initiatives:

- ❖ We’re leading efforts to stop the import of tails from undersize lobsters from Central and South America, and we’ve been working in Canada to increase minimum allowable lobster size for harvest in order to sustain the resource. (Increasing the limits allows lobsters to reach sizes more optimal for breeding.)
- ❖ We also choose not to sell lobsters that are over 4 pounds in weight, because these lobsters tend to be better breeders, producing dramatically more eggs than smaller lobsters.
- ❖ We’re partnering with the government of New Brunswick, Canada, on an innovative lobster stock enhancement project that increases the survival rate of juvenile lobsters by up to 30-fold.

## The Advantages of Responsible Aquaculture

The world's population is growing, but the ocean's ability to feed it is not. Demand is rapidly outpacing supply, and we must develop and encourage ways to fill the gap. We believe that responsible aquaculture (fish farming) can positively contribute to help fill that gap.

Darden has been an active proponent of responsible aquaculture for more than a decade. In 1997, we co-founded the [Global Aquaculture Alliance](#) to create a uniform set of standards, systems and best practices for the cultivation of fish and seafood.

This organization, which began as an alliance among a handful of restaurant companies and retailers, has grown into an impressive international coalition of more than 70 members, including buyers, growers, scientists and environmental groups. Darden thought it was important to bring many parties to the table, and we encouraged those with differing points of view to join us in our goal: furthering environmentally responsible aquaculture to meet world food needs. Darden continues to play a leadership role in the organization.

As part of our work, the GAA created a nonprofit, public-benefit organization called the Aquaculture Certification Council, Inc. (ACC), to inspect and certify companies that apply the GAA's "best aquaculture practices" (BAPs). Red Lobster was the first restaurant company in the world to require all of our aquaculture shrimp suppliers to be ACC-certified. Today, 100 percent of the aquacultured shrimp processors that supply Darden are certified.

The ACC certification covers a range of issues relating to the health and welfare of the fish, as well as water quality and other environmental issues, food safety protocols, traceability and workforce standards.

In addition to standards for shrimp, BAP standards have also been completed for tilapia and catfish – two species we source primarily from aquaculture – and we are working with our suppliers to implement these standards. Standards are currently being developed for other species, too. Our goal is to have all of our aquaculture products certified to GAA standards as they become available.

Years ago, aquaculture faced challenges when some fish farms were built on environmentally sensitive lands. The resulting negative reputation grew after some farmers began using harmful chemicals in a misguided attempt to minimize disease and maximize growth. The aquaculture industry has been working hard to demonstrate that it is a viable, reliable – and sustainable –

### Top U.S. Aquaculture Species

- Shrimp
- Salmon
- Tilapia
- Trout
- Catfish
- Cobia
- Corvina
- Barramundi

About 60% of all Darden seafood purchases (in pounds) are from aquaculture sources; the remaining 40% are wild-caught.

method to complement wild-caught fisheries. The BAP standards do not allow the degradation of sensitive land.

The fact is, when grown responsibly and according to ACC standards, aquaculture seafood has many advantages over wild-caught. Aquaculture growers have influence over so many factors, from the cleanliness of the water to the population density of the fish to the harvesting practices used. For example, in many cases, the water pumped out of our suppliers' aquaculture ponds is cleaner than what is put in.

Our suppliers' aquaculture facilities are also optimally positioned near transportation hubs. For instance, tilapia reared in aquaculture facilities in Ecuador are en route to North America within four hours of harvesting. That means they're fresher than wild species that are caught by fishing boats in the middle of the Pacific.

Today, our restaurants source most of their shrimp and salmon and all of their tilapia, trout and catfish from aquaculture suppliers. We have very high standards, inspecting each aquaculture supplier to ensure they are following our prescribed food safety practices. (For more on food safety, see the [Our Food](#) section of this website.)

We firmly believe that responsible aquaculture is one of the best ways to help meet the world's growing demand for seafood. Without it, wild fish stocks will continue their downward trend, making seafood so costly that it will be unaffordable for many people, not only in the U.S., but also the world.

### The Importance of Partnerships

At Darden, we don't make decisions about seafood in isolation; we look to the best science of the day for guidance. That's why we partner and engage with a broad array of experts.

Notable among them is our relationship with the [New England Aquarium](#). In 2005, we asked this Boston-based aquarium to begin advising us on ways we might improve existing purchasing strategies related to seafood sustainability. We also look to the Aquarium to help us collaborate on multi-stakeholder initiatives on seafood. The Aquarium's sustainable seafood program provides advice on how to develop and implement visionary and realistic sourcing policies and practices that protect the fisheries. Darden is one of several companies that participate.

"Darden is definitely playing a leadership role. The entire industry faces a supply challenge – there's just not enough seafood out there to sell. I think Darden is taking on that challenge and doing what they need to do, working with their suppliers and within their industry to find innovative solutions that will create a more sustainable supply of seafood."

*-Lydia Bergen, Director of Conservation, New England Aquarium.*

---

Bergen, the Aquarium’s director of conservation, says the program is mutually beneficial. A large buyer like Darden, she explains, can have a big impact on the supply chain by making informed seafood purchases that are environmentally responsible.

For example, Darden asked the Aquarium to evaluate whether we should consider adding the Lake Victoria Nile Perch to our list of approved species. The Aquarium’s scientists evaluated the fisheries in Kenya, Tanzania and Uganda and determined that this species was not a good choice because of potential environmental and social concerns. We listened, and decided not to purchase the fish.

We want to use our influence to enhance fisheries – both the seafood stocks themselves and the lives of those who make their living from catching them. The more we engage with scientists, governments, environmental groups, fishermen and other stakeholders, the more we learn about how we can best make a difference. We believe we can obtain the best results when we consider different viewpoints; that’s why we work to bring together a variety of stakeholders – including those who normally differ in their views or opinions – to help us move forward.

It’s all about doing the right thing and making a positive impact.

## *Where We’re Going: Continuing to Meet Demand Sustainably*

Seafood sustainability is an incredibly complex issue framed by what are often competing environmental, economic and political interests. We are pleased with the progress we have made in our commitments toward sustainable sourcing, particularly the advancements in aquaculture. Yet we don’t pretend to have all of the answers. We do know this: if current trends continue, seafood supply and demand will be on a collision course.

One of the reasons our guests come to our restaurants is because they know they will be served safe seafood that comes from only reliable sources. It’s in our best interest as a company to make sure we have an adequate and consistent supply of seafood to meet our guests’ demands. Of course, it is also in the best interest of our planet to ensure a healthy ocean ecosystem.

Consumers hear many conflicting messages about “sustainable” seafood. Should they choose wild versus farmed? Organic versus non-organic? Should it come from a “local” source? Unfortunately, there are no simple answers when it comes to seafood sustainability.

We will continue to work with partners such as government bodies, nongovernmental organizations, fishery stakeholders, suppliers, and industry trade groups, like the National Fisheries Institute, to inform our thinking. And we will rely on the best science of the day to guide us in our decisions about which seafood we should or should not serve.