BYCATCH

The word "bycatch" distinguishes the animals that we choose to kill from those that we accidentally kill. But in this essay I argue that the word succeeds only in trivializing one species at the expense of another. And, on a larger level, it is this real and imagined divide between intention and unintention that is creating bycatch of us all.

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In fishing, there is what you catch, and then there is bycatch.

Catch is what is intended; bycatch is what is unintended.

A necessary evil.
That is, until one understands the fishing industry.

We are long past the days of dinghies and fishing rods. In every ocean, fishing vessels extend nets so vast they could swallow up entire football stadiums, fans and all. Longlines that stretch for miles dangle thousands of hooks. Fishing boats today even use vacuums to suck up the creatures too small for nets.

Given such industrial-sized tools, is it fair to say bycatch is "unintentional"?

In New Zealand, the Maui's dolphins are near extinction because of the nets strung like gantlets around their territory. There are only an estimated 111 of this species of dolphin remaining, and nets traps several each year — possibly more due to lack of oversight. Dolphins may be among the most intelligent creatures in water, but they cannot avoid getting tangled up in the line between catch and bycatch.

And in the waters that surround Antarctica, penguins are meeting a similar fate. From the Magellanic to the Macaroni to the African, penguin species are in decline. We could very well see the African penguin go extinct in the next twenty years if fishing boats continue to trawl off the coast of South Africa where the penguins compete with humans for food.

Bycatch.

It's an insidious word, trivializing one species at the expense of another. And what do the seafood restaurants do to pay tribute to those creatures martyred along the way? Is there an asterisk next to the tuna entrée, with fine print at the bottom of the menu acknowledging the dolphins and sharks that gave their lives for that meal?

The fishing industry, when pressed, will admit that you can't have catch without bycatch.

And I believe them.

Let's just not call it unintentional.

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The Patagonian toothfish.

It began as bycatch — a disappointment dragged up on longlines by fisheries searching for cod. There were no buyers for this fish.

A waste of a hook. A nuisance fish.
But also a large fish. And, well prepared, a tasty fish.

In a business in which your supplies are ever dwindling, you need to invent (or reinvent) new delicacies. Consider hake, once a "trash fish," now a staple in most supermarkets.

A while back, a fish wholesaler saw an opportunity. A chance to rebrand the toothfish. He considered calling it Pacific sea bass. South American sea bass.

He settled on Chilean sea bass.

And though this fish is not native to Chile nor even a bass, it has since become one of the most profitable species of fish sold. Exotic sounding but familiar tasting. Easy to flavor. And easy to mark up.

You can walk into a restaurant and order "sustainable" Chilean sea bass, one caught by a fishery that operates under limitations. Significantly fewer hooks on the longlines.

Significantly shorter fishing season. And while this all sounds well and good, there is still no evidence of exactly what sustainable fishing has achieved so far, other than smaller catches and bycatches.

That is, there is no way to know how many of the toothfish remain because there is no way to conduct a census of a species that lives so far below the water and in waters often hostile to ships. If we don't know exactly how many fish are down there, how can we be sure we are not overfishing? How can anything be deemed truly sustainable?

And then there are pirate fishing vessels, unencumbered by regulations. When you're a pirate fishery, even bycatch is a welcome catch.

The toothfish, prehistoric in appearance, is a survivor. This is a creature built to live 50 years in the coldest waters of this planet. It does not even begin to breed until is 10 years of age, which is a problem. These fish are like redwood trees, slow to mature, slow to reproduce, yet wildly in demand. But unlike the redwoods, there are few means to protect them. The harvesting occurs deep underwater. Without witnesses. And an insatiable consumer demand. Ten years per generation might be a bit too long to outlive our craving for Chilean sea bass.

For this fish, to be demoted to bycatch again would be a blessing.

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In Ashland, Oregon, where I live, is the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service Forensics Laboratory.

It is the only lab in the world dedicated to 'crimes against wildlife'.

Like the CSI agents on television, the scientists there analyze body parts sent to them from

around the world to understand if these animals were indeed endangered (they usually are) and, more important, where and how they were killed. The scientists look for clues like dirt samples, DNA, hide and feather patterns. Anything to help connect the animal with the crime and the suspect.

They analyze shark fins. Gall bladders and paws taken from bears. Ivory tusks from elephants.

Eight of ten elephants that die are killed by poachers.

Poachers have no desire for elephant meat. The meat is left to rot on the plains, the ivory smuggled to Asia.

Last year, twenty-four tons of ivory were captured by agents around the world. It is safe to assume that this is just a fraction of the ivory that made it to its intended customers.

Those twenty-four tons of ivory are what's left of 2,500 elephants.

Imagine killing a human for his or her teeth.

Of course, poachers don't want to kill elephants. The elephants are unintentional victims.

In Africa, as in the oceans, there are many unintentional victims.

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The okapi was once a mythic animal, believed only to exist in the minds of the natives, so elusive it was deemed the 'African unicorn'.

But the okapi was and is very real. It has the markings of a zebra but is far more shy and is more closely related to the giraffe.

It is also an endangered animal.

In May 2012 there was an incident at a sanctuary at the Okapi Wildlife Reserve in the Democratic Republic of Congo. Poachers armed with AK-47s killed seven members of the organization, burned every building down, and killed fifteen okapi.
The poachers weren't there for the okapi.
They were searching for ivory tusks. They were under the mistaken impression that elephant tusks were stored at the center.
The naturalists and the okapi they had fought so hard to protect — they became collateral damage.
Bycatch.

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In August 1968, *Life Magazine* ran an article about an endangered bird, native to the Philippines, known as the monkey-eating eagle. Only 100 were estimated to be alive and the bird appeared not long for this world.

Today, the bird is called the Philippine Eagle. It has been promoted to national bird and, though still critically endangered, is protected by national law. And protected by many citizens who donate money. Time. Attention.

The Philippine Eagle is not extinct. There is still time.

We share the planet with endangered species. This is an uncomfortable truth. We can choose to assume we are on this planet to witness a lifetime of loss.

Or we can assume something else.

Of course, we do not want to lose dolphins, penguins, elephants and okapi. We don't intend to hurt them as we go about our busy lives. But intention and unintention is all that divides catch from bycatch.

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