

# the **rape** of the stock

Since being denied his favourite fish at a local seafood restaurant, one outraged consumer embarks on a journey to explore what's going on in our oceans – and what this means for you

BY MILES MASTERSON  
PORTRAITS BY ADRIAAN OOSTHUIZEN

Sorry, sir," the waiter said with a shake of his head. "We're out of kingklip." My mouth fell open. "What?"

I was at my local seafood spot, Hout Bay's Dunes restaurant, and had interrupted the waiter's recital of the

specials to order my hometown favourite: a succulent portion of *Genypterus capensis*, aka kingklip, grilled with lemon butter.

"There's been a shortage," the waiter continued. "Kingklip isn't on the menu."

Damn! I'd heard about "overfishing" and "dwindling stocks" so was vaguely aware there was something fishy going on in our seas. But in all my years of eating kingklip I'd never been denied it. What *had* happened to this species I'd always thought was teeming in the ocean?

At a braai a few days later, I mention my experience to a friend, Grant Spooner, a recreational fisherman. He whistles softly and lowers a spade-like hand below his knee. "I've been catching fish since I was that big. I started in Gordon's Bay catching harders and then white steenbras. But now white steenbras is five percent of what it should be on our coastline."

According to Spooner, illegal fishing methods, fuelled by greed, are factors in the decline of all fish stocks. This counts both internationally, especially in the North Atlantic where once abundant species such as halibut and cod have collapsed, as well as in our waters, where many species are under threat or overexploited.

The authorities introduced quotas, but dodgy fishermen have found a way around that by dumping smaller fish in favour of more lucrative larger ones. Apart from wasting many fish (especially the deep-sea species, which are usually returned to the ocean dead), this dumping has the added negative effect of not being recorded on the fishing quota.

The compound effect of this is that unscrupulous fishermen can still fulfil their permit conditions and remove an equivalent amount of fish from the sea, effectively doubling their impact on the resource.

Spooner has watched uncaring fishermen dump bycatch species, catch endangered fish, shellfish and crustaceans, fin sharks, shoot seals and birds, and pollute the ocean.

That's over and above allegations of false recording of catches and ineffective policing by our coastal authority, Marine and Coastal Management (MCM). It's no wonder the ocean is in such a mess.

These are all major problems that adversely affect ocean food chains and the long-term sustainability of ocean resources. "We've played with those ecosystems to a point where we have totally disrupted them," says Spooner.

At the root of the problem, adds Spooner, is the world's increasing appetite for seafood. After all, these fishermen are not raiding the ocean's bounty for themselves alone. The health benefits of seafood have resulted in the shortages of fish stocks. "Look at how fashionable it has become with sushi," says Spooner. "It's become cool to eat fish." And even though our fish is under threat, we dunk our sashimi in soy sauce at alarming rates.

## FISH FRAUD

Quenton Spickernel plates up the Catch of the Day at Dunes, gives instructions to his sous-chef and carries the fish to the table. It isn't kingklip, but it will do. Tastes will change. They have to. No one knows that better than Spickernel, Dunes' manager.

Across the bay, a fleet of fully laden fishing boats chug home into the harbour. "I've seen our indigenous stocks decreasing at an alarming rate," he says. More than three decades spent in the ocean as a fisherman, diver and purveying seafood have led Spickernel to become deeply concerned about the state of southern Africa's fish resources.

"People don't understand how plentiful these stocks once were. All your reef and bank species like grunter and seventy-four, musselcrackers, romans and stumps, all of those are gone; well, not gone, but threatened, and now the same thing is happening with your core restaurant-listed items: kob, Cape salmon and kingklip."

When it came to why the kingklip didn't land on my plate, Spickernel says kingklip was taken off the menu partly because of economics, as scarcity had pushed up the cost ("We used to pay R50 a kilo for kingklip, now it's more than doubled"), but also out of a moral duty. Dunes, which goes through up to 50kg of fish a day, felt it had to help reduce demand for this and other exploited local fish species.

It's one of the few fish restaurants to join the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (Sassi), which has launched a red-orange-green fish campaign to educate consumers and sellers of fish. Fish on the red list are illegal, fish on the orange list are best avoided and fish on the green list can be eaten at will. Sassi hopes to create an army of informed consumers, wielding pocket guides distinguishing between green, orange and red.

## The Kingklip "Chain of Custody"

Kingklip is primarily landed as an "incidental bycatch" of the SA "demersal" (bottom dwelling) targeted hake fishery. Participants in these fisheries require a permit of total allowable catch (TAC) quota.

For kingklip, this is usually about three to five percent of the hake TAC, within a current total sector bycatch limit of 3 500 tons. Hake and kingklip are mostly trawled, while 10 percent are caught by longline.

Some large trawl companies have factory vessels that process, package and freeze their catch at sea. But on the smaller "wetfish" trawlers and longline vessels, fresh hake, kingklip and other valuable quota bycatch reach the shore on ice, where they are then offloaded for processing at shore-based factories and distributed to markets. The bigger fisheries own their own fleets and

despatch this fish within their internal networks.

The fish is then either vacuum-packed in fillet form and packaged for local supermarkets or for the export market, and to a lesser degree sold on to independent retailers and restaurants. Some trawlers and longliners sell their catch on to the big companies or to retailers, and some have their own retail outlets and sell their catch themselves. This is how most "fresh" fish finds its way to local fishmongers and restaurants.

Depending on availability, at the first point of sale kingklip can fetch anywhere from R30/kg from the independent boats through the middlemen to R65/kg. It then climbs to between R90/kg and R180/kg in subsequent retail outlets and supermarkets. Once it's on your plate, kingklip can then fetch up to R200/kg, depending on the restaurant.

A 2002 Sassi study found that 92 percent of seafood outlets in KZN contravened at least one aspect of our Marine Living Resources Act. This mainly focused on trading in red-listed or undersized fish, but also touched on duplicity.

According to Spickernel, many seafood outlets dupe their customers into assuming they are consuming one fish species when they are eating another. "They'll take blue fish trawled out of Saldanha and call it musselcracker."

Jaco Barendse, a passionate environmentalist and Sassi researcher, who I met in the coffee shop at the Two Oceans Aquarium, says that a small – but significant – group of dishonest operators among the hundreds of seafood outlets countrywide con their customers.

"They think consumers don't know any better. The 'local' kingklip we think we're eating is more often than not ling or cusk eel, shipped in from Argentina or New Zealand." Closely related to kingklip, these species are virtual gastronomic doppelgängers to the genuine article and, as they are imported cheaper than it costs to obtain domestic kingklip, are sold at a higher profit.

According to Sassi credo, this fraud exerts unnecessary consumer pressure on overexploited species, as in the case of kingklip; even though they're caught legally (mainly as a bycatch by deep-sea trawlers and longliners),

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the true status of these stocks is masked from an unsuspecting public. Understandably, we then still think they are more plentiful than they really are. "Which," adds Barendse, "kind of undermines what we're doing."

And if selling goldfish as marlin to an unsuspecting public wasn't enough, Barendse reveals that over 100 SA fish stocks are in serious jeopardy. Linefish, caught commercially or by SA's 500 000 recreational fishermen, form the majority of the most exploited or depleted stocks on the Sassi danger lists.

Seventy-four is the prime example of a red-listed fish stock that has recently collapsed. A favourite in seafood curries, this fish once made up 70 percent of the total catch in KZN. In 1910, more than 1 000 tons a year were landed, but by 1997 the total reported catch had plummeted to 1.4 tons a year. A decade on, seventy-four has barely recovered and is still illegal to catch.

Barendse warns that kob (kabeljou) is under immense pressure. "Silver and dusky kob are below five percent of their historical breeding stock, which is a crisis."



**MORAL DUTY**  
Dunes manager Quenton Spickernel has removed kingklip from the menu.

it often filled up the entire deck of his boat. "But then they allowed the longliners to come in, which was a disaster," he groans.

Traditionally the preserve of hake trawlers, who had always caught kingklip as an unrestricted incidental bycatch in their nets over "soft" sandy seabed in the early to mid-Eighties, longliners were permitted by then marine management authority Sea Fisheries (later MCM) to start casting their multiple-hooked lines for kingklip. Within a few years, the catch rates of kingklip dropped dramatically.

"Longline fishing was new to South Africa and skippers had motivated for a trial period on utilising longline fishing for hake," explains Dave Japp of fisheries consultancy Capfish. "But when they found they could catch kingklip quite quickly, the whole emphasis moved onto kingklip. Then [in 1989] we realised it was more than likely going to damage the stock, so the fishery was stopped."

Apart from affecting a sharp decline in kingklip, this "experiment" contributed to the animosity between longliners and trawlers. And this feud continues to fester, since longliners were again allowed to catch hake along with a bycatch quota of kingklip in the Nineties.

If you speak to trawl skippers like Coetzee, it's the longliners who are causing the most



**FIGHTING FOR CHANGE**  
Jaco Barendse, environmentalist and Sassi researcher, has devoted his life to reversing the decline of our fish stocks.

## Foreign boats, accused of the most wicked fishing practices, are “re-flagged” South African to get around our marine law

damage to fish stocks, some by illegally targeting bycatch species such as kingklip. You’ll also hear how longliners, who are able to fish over “hard” or rocky ground (where kingklip congregate) and soft ground, impinge on traditional trawl grounds and drag their lines through trawl nets, destroying them.

Josie Fransico, a longline skipper with four decades of fishing to his name, is vociferous in his rage towards trawlers and the big fishing companies they supply, which, he claims, are out to ruin longliners, who are mostly small, independent operators.

He accuses trawlers of ruining longlines by dragging their nets across them and says trawlers are illegally targeting overexploited bycatch species. “They are working on hard bottom, they are working on semi-bottom, they go over your gear, they trawl anywhere.”

Overseas vessels aggravate the problem. “They’ve got a couple of foreign trawlers coming here and destroying the bycatch,” he says. In 1977, SA declared a 200 nautical mile exclusive economic zone and banned foreign boats. Overseas fleets have intruded illegally since then, but most are Spanish trawlers who have entered into joint agreements with SA fishermen and companies, many of them empowerment quota holders who don’t own vessels. These foreign boats, accused of the most wicked fishing practices, are then “re-flagged” South African to get around our marine law.

At Capfish HQ, Japp remains neutral. While there are questionable practices on both sides, the biggest issue is the compound effect of having so many people fishing a finite resource.

The pressure of political transformation to more evenly distribute our marine resources among the fishing industry, subsistence fishers and hobbyists, means there is a huge demand for commercial and recreational fishing permits, while at the same time MCM struggles to police our 3 000km coastline.

Once only a handful of operators plied their trade in hake fishery; now there are hundreds. “The pressure comes onto the spawning stock. The fish can’t spawn properly, they can’t breed, and you can’t get your recovery,” explains Japp.

Despite improvements in technology, the setting of limits and assessments of all fish stock is an “inexact science”. The ocean is a vast three-dimensional entity and most independent assessments are at best a close guesstimate.

Regarding the actual status of stock such as hake and kingklip, many feel environmental factors also play a role and that recent declines are less to do with the fisheries and more to do with global warming, which, some experts believe, has affected ocean currents, causing many fish in the food chain to move away from their traditional grounds to find food.

## CAST THE NET WIDER

Added to all of this is economic pressure. As the cost of fishing increases, so does the price of all fish products. This is compounded by the fact that most of our hake and much of our trawled kingklip is exported, further affecting their spread locally. Like our fruit and wine, these products fetch a higher price on the international market, which affects its price and availability at

## Become an Empowered Fish Consumer

- 1 Find out more about our fish stocks and which species are on Sassi’s green, orange and red lists ([panda.org.za/sassi](http://panda.org.za/sassi)). Keep the guide in your wallet.
- 2 Spread awareness among your family and friends and local restaurants.
- 3 Eat more fish on the green list and less on the orange, which will reduce demand on overexploited stocks. Never eat red-listed fish.

- 4 Assume your rights as a consumer and ask restaurant managers if the seafood is actually what they claim it is and where it came from.
- 5 If you suspect restaurants/retailers of questionable practices, use Sassi’s “FishMS” SMS service (079 499 8795) to find out if their fish is legit.
- 6 Report any exploitation of marine resources to MCM on its anonymous hotline: 0800 116 110.

- 7 Become a fish reservist. MCM is developing a programme to take on honorary fishery patrol officers (similar to police reservists) as extra eyes and ears in its fight against poachers and other transgressors of marine law. Contact MCM on 0861 123 626 for more information.
- 8 Contribute funds to the WWF or similar organisations to help with the quest to preserve our fish stocks for future generations.

home. “If you had 10 000 tons of good quality hake and the best money is the Spanish market, you’re going to sell [to the Spanish],” says Japp.

Spickkernel believes many restaurants lack imagination when it comes to promoting more plentiful, if less well-known, species. “The chefs are still stuck in a rut of offering the same three species when we’ve got access to 30 or 40 different species. You’d think all chefs would key into this because it represents variety and different cooking techniques, but it’s just the same old kob, Cape salmon, kingklip, lemon butter sauce, *klaar!*” Fish eaters should be more adventurous. “It’s demand, and demand is going to cripple these stocks.”

But the tide is turning. There have been thousands of responses to Sassi’s SMS service, which indicates public awareness is on the increase. Many retailers and restaurants are refusing to trade in red-listed fish.

Chris Kasten of Robberg Seafoods, one of the few independent retailers signed up with Sassi, says: “A US scientist once said people will go

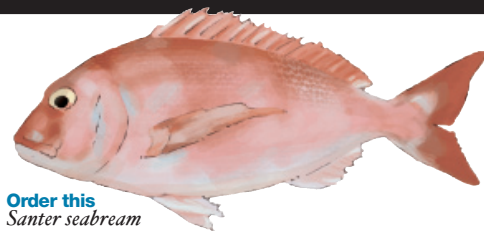
into a fish store and even if they see red-list species, they don’t seem too concerned, but if they go into a butchery and see tiger chops or rhino steaks they’ll do something about it. You can’t expect people to make choices without information. You have to take a role in influencing consumer trends, as it will also have an impact on the longevity of your business.”

If nothing else, like the ocean itself, the complexities of not only our local but international fisheries are myriad, as are the challenges facing the human race when it comes to preserving the world’s fish stocks.

The next time I go into a seafood restaurant, I’ll take the Sassi list. I’ve come to realise that it’s the consumers who really hold the power; one by one, we have to take responsibility to ensure our local fish stocks survive. ■

**ONLINE EXTRA**  
For more on the state of kob fish stocks and the effectiveness of Marine and Coastal Management go to [bestlife.co.za/october](http://bestlife.co.za/october)

## Order this!



Order this  
*Santer seabream (soldier)*



Order this  
*South African sardines or bake*



Order this  
*Mussels, oysters or calamari*

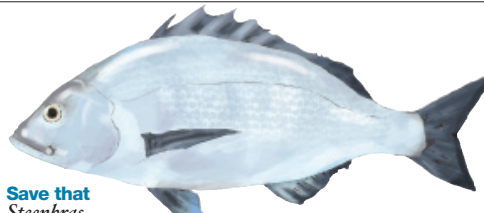


Order this  
*Fast-growing mobile linefish: yellowtail, dorado, snoek*

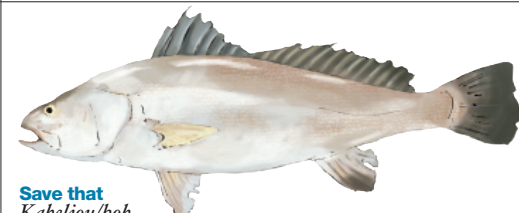


Order this  
*Bluefish/blue-nose/blue-eye*

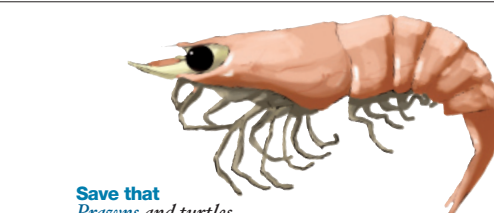
## Save that!



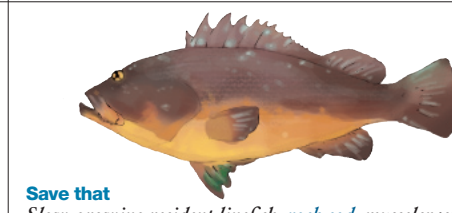
Save that  
*Steenbras*



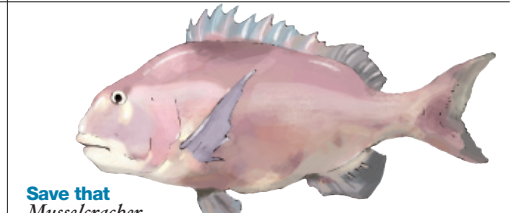
Save that  
*Kabeljou/kob*



Save that  
*Prawns and turtles*



Save that  
*Slow-growing resident linefish: rock cod, musselcracker*



Save that  
*Musselcracker*

Save endangered species: broaden your taste for alternative fish. Jaco Barendse of the WWF and Sassi tells you what you should and shouldn’t eat

**Why?** White steenbras is illegal to sell and struggling to recover from overfishing. Red steenbras (the biggest seabream species in the world, growing up to over 50kg and 1.3m, and reaching an age of 30) may still be sold, but only just. Both species are only found in SA.

**Why?** The main species, dusky and silver kob, have breeding stocks below 10 percent of their original levels. Watch out for “plate-sized” kob. Unless they’ve been farmed (this doesn’t necessarily make them sustainable), the legal minimum size for kob is at least 40cm.

**Why?** Mussels and oysters are farmed in a more environmentally friendly way. Ask your prawn supplier for fisheries that employ bycatch-reduction or turtle-excluder devices. Look out for low-density farmed tiger prawns from Madagascar. These operate in a responsible way.

**Why?** The use of the term “linefish” has been corrupted over time, so it doesn’t necessarily tell you much about the actual fish or how it was really caught. Make a point of checking the name of the linefish and make sure it was line-caught.

**Why?** White musselcracker is a legendary non-commercial angling and spearfishing fish and is illegal to sell. Black musselcracker (poenskop) has become a bit of a rarity (reaching 45 years of age) and doesn’t belong on any respectable restaurant table.