

Herring: King Of The Sea

Contributed by Kipperman

Some say it is; others say it isn't! So, is it the king of the sea? Well, if its nutritional and health benefits, its sustainability and abundance, its ease of catching and its great taste are anything to go by, then yes, it is a very worthy humble fish. The salmon might be the prince, and the cod the pretender, but, as the saying goes, 'of all the fish in the Sea, the herring is King'.

So first to the nutritional effects of herring: what are they? Herring is rich in the Omega-3 polyunsaturated fatty acids so essential to the human body. These fatty acids benefit the cardiac muscles in the heart and are proven to reduce the chance of a heart attack. Indeed, a doctor's surgery in Orkney went as far as prescribing herring to patients at a risk from heart disease. The same fatty acids are said to reduce the chance of a miscarriage in expectant mothers.

Recent research, though, has thrown open a number of more wide-reaching benefits. Professor Michael Crawford, the Director of the Institute of Brain Chemistry & Human Nutrition at the London Metropolitan University, has been studying the effects of these fatty acids on the human brain. He has found that these acids, and especially one called docosahexaenoic acid – DHA for short – are so essential to the functioning of the brain that without the DHA both the brain and the eyes begin to slow down. He cites mental ill-health as the biggest problem facing Britain health-wise, much more so than obesity, and associates this decline in a reduction of intake in these fatty acids. Herring, he says, has been a traditional food for centuries, and this decline in the amount we eat is a sinister threat to our well-being.

These fatty acids also help in the battle against other mal-functionings of the brain such as Multiple Sclerosis, Parkinson's and Alzheimer's disease. Furthermore, deficiencies in them are associated with deficiencies in Vitamin A and many other minerals so vital in the proper functioning of the body.

Dr Joseph Hibbeln of the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, part of the U.S. Government's National Institutes of Health, has been studying the relationship between fish eating and aggression. He has discovered that, with low levels of Omega-3 in the body there is a corresponding low level of Cortisone Releasing Factor (CRF) which tends to trigger of aggressive behaviour. Those that ate more fish were less hostile and aggressive and thus, he has concluded, these fatty acids have a role in psychiatric disorders. According to Hibbeln, 'rates of depression are markedly different across countries, depending on how much fish is consumed in those countries. Further findings have shown a link between a lack of these fatty acids and symptoms of bipolar disorder, schizophrenia and attempted suicides.

There are some who correlate much of the ills in today's society with the decline in fish consumption, and most notably herring. Up to the 1950s, herring was part of the nation's staple diet until, for many reasons, people were put off. Herring became unfashionable because it was associated with poverty and the war years. Since this decrease in its consumption, aggression, depression, mental illness, heart disease and other complaints have dramatically increased. It might be naïve to suggest the lack of fish consumption is the only cause, but there is evidence to propound a link.

In Britain, the fishing industry has, in 2004, reported a bumper harvest for herring, and the amount landed has been increasing year on year for several years now. While not yet at pre-war levels, there is enough evidence to suggest that supplies are healthy at a time in a drastic shortage of some species such as cod and haddock. The biggest problem seems to be that much of the catch goes to industrial processing for fish and animal meal so that it is often difficult to find in the shops in the UK. This is an absolutely crazy situation when good edible fish is being processed instead of being presented to the human food chain. Thus it has to be assumed that herring is perfectly sustainable at the current levels of its catch. As to its ease of catching, traditionally it was caught in drift-nets but today much of the catch is taken by mid-water trawlers working in pairs. Some is caught in purse-seine nets. Only the smallest amount is taken in drift-nets by the few longshore fishermen working close to the shore in small boats.

Now as to the taste: there are those that insist herring is an unpalatable fish. How blind and confused these people must be. For there's nothing quite like a grilled or oven baked fresh herring, or indeed a kipper fresh from the smokehouse. But that's not all, for there are hundreds of ways of cooking herring, marinating it or using it after it has been smoked. Fresh kipper pate, for example, or homemade bloater paste, kipper soup or kipper rissoles are all variations. Fresh herring with black pepper and lime crust is delicious. There are probably enough recipes for herring for each day of the year. It really is an adaptable and succulent fish. Don't be put off by memories of over-boiled cabbage and smelly kippers. But, remember, when buying a fresh kipper – make sure they are not one of the

dyed versions. They are horrible!

Thus, in conclusion, it can be seen how essential herring is to our diet. Yet do we see any politicians advocating its consumption? Do we see them on their soap-boxes decrying its use in the processing industry? Herring fishing was once a huge industry in Britain, from where it was exported all over the globe. In parts of the country it employed a quarter of the population in its catching, curing and distribution. The railways ran herring trains! The evidence from both Prof Michael Crawford and Dr Joseph Hibbeln point to the fact that it is a major factor in the health of the nation. However do we see the government, at a time when they are producing white papers about the nation's health, even mention the humble herring? No. They might harp on about obesity, no smoking and other peripheral matters, but they miss the most fundamental aspects of our health: that is the importance of Omega-3 in those areas of health most under threat – heart disease, aggression and mental disorder. Herring might not be the only source of this essential Omega-3 fatty acid, but it has one of the highest concentrations of it of any food. It might be a small and humble fish, but it sure packs a great big punch!

This article was kindly provided by Mike Smylie – M Phil. Fisheries and maritime historian, aka ‘kipperman’, BBC Radio 4 Food & Farming Awards Food Campaigner/Educator 2005, writer and author.

For further information on the herring see Herring – A History of the Silver Darlings by Mike Smylie, published by Tempus Publishing in 2004.

For details of ‘The Herring Exhibition’ and where it is appearing, phone 07971-255943