

WHO EATS WHOM?

by David Cairns

The big fish eats the little fish, but what does the little fish eat?

Everyone can trace the simple food chains of people eating the cow that has eaten the grass, or the fox eating the hare that has eaten the bark of your apple tree. But the food chains of the sea are largely invisible and to the uninitiated are quite mysterious.

To start with the big fish--the common large fish of our area are cod, herring and mackerel which are often but not always, at the top of the food chain. With a bit of bad luck, any of these fish may become a meal for a seal, a seabird, or that super-fish the tuna.

But in general cod, herring and mackerel are the big fish that eat the little fish in the Gulf of St. Lawrence. These may include capelin, lance, silversides and, very frequently, young of their own species. Small fish don't eat other fish (except some of their younger relatives), but rather prey on tiny crustaceans and other invertebrates, which are collectively known as zooplankton. These zooplankton are everywhere in the sea, and some of them are quite visible to the naked eye if one concentrates them by straining seawater through a nylon stocking.

And what do zooplankton eat? These tiny animals may be predators on other, smaller forms, or they may graze directly on the ultimate source of food--plants. Plants in the sea are generally small, so small that they even look tiny through a microscope. But they are so abundant that they form the foundation for life in the sea.

In feeding the hungry mouths of zooplankton, little fish and big fish, these microscopic "phytoplankton" are assisted by seaweeds and remains of grasses washed into the sea from salt marshes. These plants are eventually beaten by the elements into bite-sized chunks for zooplankton, and thus nourish the whole food chain.

And so the sea around us is not empty save the occasional codfish or errant lobster buoy. It is a veritable animal chowder, suspended in a finer broth of plant soup.

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LITTERBUGS BEWARE

by Margaret Mallett, Charlottetown

At Fox River, Cumberland County, Nova Scotia, there is a charming lay-by where someone had a thought for the wayfarer. Clear cold spring water gushes from a pipe at just the right height for filling a container. There is a plank to stand on; also a trash can, painted, and aptly inscribed:

"If you must litter and deface,
or mar the beauty of this place,
May you be cursed with forty warts,
and hordes of ants invade your shorts."

