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Do People Really Eat Jellyfish?

Jellyfish as food may sound incongruous or even disgusting to some, but it does not matter: people eat these invertebrates. What they put in their mouths, however, is not the slimy, watery goo our imagination conjures when we see live jellyfish in the ocean, in a public aquarium or stranded on a beach.

Jellyfish are easy to catch — just scoop them from the water. But once caught, they must be quickly processed: that is, soaked in a mixture of salt and alum (otherwise known as potassium aluminum sulfate), which sucks excess water from the jellyfish and firms up their bodies. As a result, the water content of jellyfish is reduced from about 98 percent to about 80 percent — about the same water content as fresh vegetables or fresh finfish. Indeed, processed jellyfish are quite crunchy. Given that they are essentially tasteless, jellyfish can thus be served like noodles to accompany another dish, or sliced into chunks to be dipped in some sauce.

About 1 million tonnes of jellyfish (fresh weight) are caught annually, mostly in Asia (China catches about 50 percent of the total), but increasingly in places

like the Gulf of California in Mexico. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations reports much lower catches, but then it tends to underestimate the catches of nearly all global fisheries (see page 10). The overwhelming part of the non-Chinese catch is exported to China for human consumption, where they are considered a delicacy. Japan, Taiwan and Thailand also have high consumption rates for jellyfish. Consumption is likely to spread globally, if only because eating jellyfish won't make you fat.

People use jellyfish for other things, including as filler in animal feed for finfish and shellfish, as fertilizers, as emulsifiers for the food industry and in various medical agents ranging from anticoagulants to collagen supplements.

Some think that the increasing consumption and utilization of jellyfish by humans could slow down increases in jellyfish populations as reported from most of the world's marine ecosystems¹. But this is not likely. This is because edible jellyfish (i.e., those with relatively firm bodies, such as the cannonball jellyfish) are only a

small subset of the many species that are now proliferating throughout the world's coastal waters, clogging up the intake pipes of power and desalination plants, scaring tourists away from Mediterranean beaches, killing the occasional swimmer in Australia and generally making a nuisance of themselves.

But then, people have created the conditions in marine ecosystems that give jellyfish an advantage over their competitors. This has been driven by the decimation of previously huge populations of leatherback turtles and of large fishes that feed nearly exclusively or predominately on jellyfish. Also, the construction of commercial docks, marinas and other coastal installations introduced the hard, concrete surfaces that jellyfish larvae need to settle on to produce new jellyfish. Either way, there are jellyfish in our future. We might as well eat some.

¹Brotz, L, W.W.L. Cheung, K. Kleisner, E. Pakhomov and D. Pauly. 2012. Increasing jellyfish populations: trends in Large Marine Ecosystems. *Hydrobiologia* 690(1): 3-20