

THE UNHAPPY ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES OF STATUS SEEKING

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- Why is it that so many of the consumption goods we value and love are ecologically degrading?
- Even when substitutes exist...



Hypothesis



- We value those goods simply because they are ecologically constrained.....
- Rarity value – an intrinsic value attributed to a good only on account of its rarity, not because of its functionality.
- Goods which are limited in supply, ecologically, are thus more highly sought after.

Unhappy examples



- Asian businessmen close deals by consuming plate of lips of napoleon wrasse reef fish (250\$ a pair) – on the verge of extinction.

Unhappy examples – Blue fin tuna

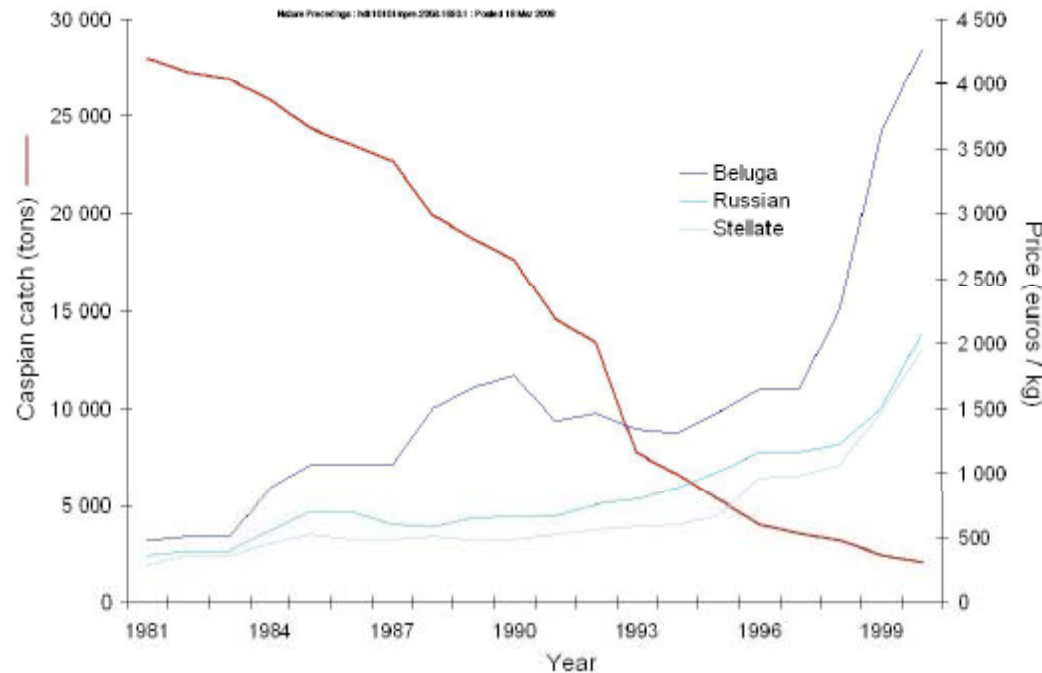
- The population of Blue fin tuna, coveted for Sushi, is on the verge of collapse.
- Evidence from Restaurants in New York.

(Jacob Lowenstein, in preparation).



Unhappy examples – Sturgeon fish

- Impending Extinction of many species of Sturgeon fish as a result of demand for caviar
- Rarity value confirmed experimentally by Gault, Meinard & Courchamp (2008)



What Drives Rarity Value?

- **Conspicuous consumption** (Thorstein Veblen).
- A **signal** of wealth and power, perhaps evolutionary vestige of way to attract females (alpha male)

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"I like it, but I'm looking for more of a status symbol. Any way you can double the price?"

Pathways from Conspicuous Consumption to Environmental Degradation



Anthropogenic Allee Effect .1

Courchamp, F., Angulo E., Rivalan P. *et al.* (2006)

- Normally, when species become more rare, harvesting cost increases → market price increases → demand reduces → species population stabilizes.
- But when rarity increases demand, it may be that demand may continue to increase even as harvest costs increase. This can lead to species extinction.

Pathways from Conspicuous Consumption to Environmental Degradation



Anthropogenic Allee Effect .1

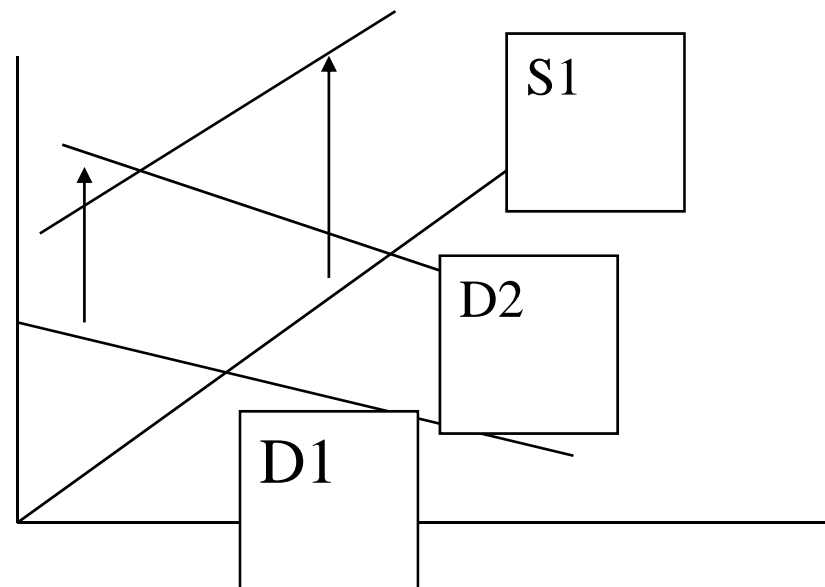
Courchamp, F., Angulo E., Rivalan P. *et al.* (2006)

- Famous, hypothetical historical example: Easter island was completely deforested of palm trees, used in former times to roll and transport stone from quarries at center of island to build *moai* statues, presumably by the powerful.

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- Rarity shifts the Demand curve up

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- Declaration of endangered species or scientific identification of rare species will hasten its extinction, as collectors are made aware of its rarity.
- Example: the turtle *cheloina mccordi* from the Indonesian island of Roti and the gecko *goniurossaurus luyi* from southeastern China (Stuart, Rhodin, Grismer Hansel, Science letters)

Pathways from Conspicuous Consumption to Environmental Degradation



2. Failure of Substitutes

- Often, environmental sustainability relies on “substitution” of natural goods by man-made or natural alternatives.
- But when rarity raises value, even perfect artificial substitutes may fail to decrease pressure of the environment.

Pathways from Conspicuous Consumption to Environmental Degradation



3. Inertial Demand and Shifting Supply

- Certain goods may have acquired rarity/status value when local supply was limited by ecological factors (and technology was 'primitive').
- Alternatively, opening of trade to a removed source of increased supply may increase pressure on the resource/species at the removed location.

Pathways from Conspicuous Consumption to Environmental Degradation



3. Inertial Demand and Shifting Supply

- Example: water-intensive rice was not traditionally grown in Semi-Arid regions of India (e.g. Telangana). After the introduction of tube wells, rice cultivation has grown dramatically, traditional crops neglected, and groundwater aquifers depleted.

What can be done?



- Targeted education policies to unroot the entrenched perception of some of these products as symbols of status.
- Education and consciousness raising - status should be associated with conservation, not wasteful consumption. conspicuous consumption should become a source of shame, not status.