TED DANSON

ACTOR, OCEANA CO-FOUNDER

THIS EMMY- AND GOLDEN GLOBE-WINNING ACTOR TALKS ABOUT EXPLAINING POLLUTED BEACHES TO HIS LITTLE GIRLS, FIGHTING FOR THE OCEAN, AND WHY YOU MAY BE GETTING RIPPED OFF WHEN YOU ORDER SEAFOOD.

BY TERENCE LOOSE

PHOTO BY SETH BROWARNIK



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AS AN ACTOR, Ted Danson has had a long and successful career, from his iconic portrayal of the easy-going ladies man Sam Malone in "Cheers" to his current role as the smart night shift supervisor on "C.S.I." But perhaps his most meaningful and lasting successes are those few of his fans know about: the major victories he's had in helping to protect the ocean and its creatures.

In short, over the past 30 years Danson has been on the forefront of fights to stop oil drilling close to shore, overfishing, seafood fraud, and more through Oceana, the largest international organization focused solely on ocean conservation. And he's been successful. In fact, recently, thanks to Danson's and Oceana's work, President Obama announced an initiative to combat seafood fraud, a problem that, if you eat fish, affects not only your wallet, but possibly your health. From the sushi bar to the supermarket, many of the premium fish you believe you're buying – wild salmon, for instance – are often another, cheaper fish entirely. Worse, currently there's little regulation and even less policing of this major consumer fraud.

There is Oceana, however, an organization that grew directly from Danson's passion for saving the oceans. *Coast* asked Danson why protecting the ocean is so close to his heart, and why it should be to yours.

You've said you first became aware of ocean pollution problems when you saw a sign at a Santa Monica beach. Why did that have such an impact?

It was 1984, right in the middle of "Cheers," and I was walking with my two young daughters when we came across a beach that was closed due to pollution. They naturally wanted to know how a beach could be closed, but I had no idea what to tell them. I started doing some research on my own and tried to get involved with the

in the present and for future generations. We can strike a balance between feeding as many people as possible and keeping the oceans healthy and biodiverse. It's actually a very realistic goal and we know how to achieve it.

What is ocean acidification and why is it such a threat?

The oceans are becoming more acidic as they continue to absorb the carbon dioxide we emit into the atmosphere. The change may seem

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issues on a local level soon after that. That day on the beach was really the beginning of this journey for me.

How and why did you start the American Oceans Campaign and did you ever imagine it would grow into Oceana?

The American Oceans Campaign was born out of a fight to stop Occidental Petroleum from drilling a number of wells off the coast of Santa Monica. I attended some local meetings on the issue and met a wonderful environmental lawyer named Robert Sulnick, who was a veteran of these sorts of fights. We teamed up and stopped those wells from being drilled. On the heels of that success we started the American Oceans Campaign, which later grew into Oceana as we now know it.

Many people might assume Oceana is against fishing or eating fish, but that isn't true. Why not and what is Oceana's stand on seafood?

At Oceana we love seafood. We actually encourage people to eat fish because it's healthier and better for the planet than other types of animal protein. We also recognize the fact that about a billion people in the world are hungry, and many of them rely on wild fish as their main source of animal protein. We can't tell people to stop eating seafood, especially those who need it for survival. What we can do is make sure the oceans are a well-managed food source so hundreds of millions of people can benefit both

miniscule on the pH scale, but it's enough for us to already see negative effects on tropical and cold water corals, as well as marine species that make their own shells. If something isn't done soon, scientists say that we could see a massive decline in coral reefs by the end of the century.

What is wrong with the way we commercially fish?

To put it simply, we are taking too many fish out of the water and not giving them enough time to rebound. Luckily, most of the fish we catch around the world have the common sense to live in the coastal zones that are controlled by individual nations. So, we have an opportunity to restore the oceans by reforming how we fish on a national level. It is much more practical than having to rely on some cumbersome international body.

Is farmed fish the answer?

There isn't a "one-size fits all" answer here. It really depends on the type of fish we're talking about. You have to ask yourself, "What does this farmed fish eat?" Salmon, for example, are carnivores. They eat other fish. So, when you farm salmon you actually have to convert three or four pounds of wild fish to make one pound of farmed salmon. It's inefficient. On the other hand, shellfish like mussels, clams and oysters are a great farmed option. They're filter feeders, so they're not competing for food we would otherwise eat. And, they help clean the waters they live in.

A recent Oceana study found that 33 percent of the seafood tested was not what it was purported to be. What are the biggest culprits?

Oceana's national study found that sushi vendors were the biggest culprit of mislabeling (74 percent) followed by restaurants (38 percent) and then grocery stores (18 percent). The most commonly mislabeled fish were those sold as snapper and tuna, which had mislabeling rates of 87 and 59 percent, respectively.

Why should we care as consumers?

Seafood fraud affects consumers' health and wallets. Fish that carry warning labels like mackerel and escolar are commonly labeled as other species, so we become blind to the potential health risks in front of us. Cheaper fish, like tilapia, are often labeled as red snapper and sold at a premium, so consumers end up getting ripped off without knowing it.

What does Obama's recent action on seafood fraud and illegal fishing mean?

President Obama's announcement that he is setting up an initiative to tackle seafood fraud is a huge victory for Oceana and the oceans. Oceana published several studies that uncovered the impact of seafood fraud nationwide, and we've been pushing for traceability of seafood "from boat to plate" for several years now. The president's decision to require federal agencies to work together on a program to stop seafood fraud validates all of our hard work and is a big step in the right direction.

Do you believe we can still turn things around?

Absolutely. The great part about this work is that despite all the threats facing the ocean, we still have time to turn things around. The oceans are luckily very resilient and they'll bounce back if we give them a chance. That means implementing science-based fishing limits around the world, protecting important habitat and reducing how many fish we waste by throwing them overboard. It won't be easy, but it is a very manageable task.

What are the top three concrete steps individuals can take to reverse the trends?

- 1. Connect with the ocean in whatever way means most to you. Start from a place of joy. It's the only way we stand a chance.
- 2. Make responsible choices when eating seafood. Eat wild seafood, choose smaller species and buy local fish when you can. Also, eat as much shellfish as you want (except shrimp!).
- 3. Get involved. Go to oceana.org and sign up to be a Wavemaker.



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