Seafood from the Mediterranean

This photograph shows a mosaic of sea creatures in the Roman bath at Sbeitla in Tunisia, made in the 4th or 5th century CE. The Mediterranean has the world’s second highest percentage of native species of sea life.

More than 900 fish species are found in the Mediterranean, of which 100 are fished for sale, such as swordfish and blue-fin tuna. Algae and invertebrates like corals, mollusks and crustaceans live on the rocky bottom of the sea, where fish feed and reproduce. Other species include sea grasses, sponges, green turtles, loggerhead turtles, and the Mediterranean monk seal, and 18 species of marine mammals such as dolphins and whales.

Seafood is an important part of the Mediterranean diet. It is very high in protein, but much lower in fat than meat. Fat in seafood is rich in Omega 3 fats, which are very beneficial to heart health. Dried fish are often very high in salt.

Fishing on the Mediterranean Sea is an ancient profession, and prehistoric people have left piles (middens) of mollusk shells behind as evidence of their diets. People fished from the shore and from simple watercraft at first. As shipbuilding advanced, fishing in deep water became possible. With hooks, it is possible to catch one fish at a time. Baskets or fish traps on rivers made it possible to catch multiple fish. With nets knotted from rope or string of linen or palm fiber, people could catch many fish at one time. Regular fishing journeys brought fish to shore for sale.

Preservation of fish by drying with salt or conserving in oil allowed fish to be stored and traded. Fermented fish sauces were made from fish waste, and used to flavor other dishes.

Today, the biggest problems for the Mediterranean ecosystem are overfishing, pollution from waste water and shipping, and invasive species entering the Mediterranean through the Suez Canal, and in the ballast water of international ships. Increased oil and gas drilling and global warming are additional threats to the Mediterranean.

Source: “WWF - Marine Environment: The Mediterranean Sea and Its Coasts.”