

Eaten to Extinction

Earth911

In downtown Reykjavik, several restaurants catering to tourists offer whale meat. Perhaps they find the idea of doing something that's illegal back home tempting. Perhaps they believe eating whale is a traditional Icelandic experience. Whatever their reasoning, many tourists will choose to eat whale steak during their Iceland vacation.

But the environment is global, and whether you are acting at home or abroad, [what you buy](#) and what you eat can make a difference for endangered and threatened species.

Whale Meat



Icelandic whalers hunt the endangered fin whale, pictured in this photo. Photo credit: Aqqa Rosing-Asvid – Visit Greenland [[CC BY 2.0](#)], [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Icelandic whalers hunt both the endangered fin whale and the minke whale. It's the minke that usually shows up on menus. Although this species' population is the most stable of any great whale, it is still listed under the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species ([CITES](#)).

Statistics are hard to find on how much of Iceland's whale meat tourists eat. But if locals defend whaling politically, they [don't have much of a taste](#) for the meat.

According to one poll, only 1.7 percent of Icelanders eat whale meat at least monthly. The rise of [responsible tourism](#) probably contributed to the good news that in 2019, for the first time in 17 years, there will be [no whale hunting](#) in Iceland.



The most commonly served whale meat is from the minke whale. The minke whale is listed under CITES. Photo credit: The great big fish in the sky [CC0], [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Softshell Turtles

The news is not always so positive. In April, the [last known female](#) Yangtze giant softshell turtle died in a zoo in Suzhou, China. Once plentiful, softshell turtles, like many other turtle species, are prized as food. Habitat loss and [overharvesting](#) have driven the species to the brink of almost certain extinction.



Prized as food, the critically endangered Yangtze giant softshell turtle have almost been eaten to extinction. Photo credit: Phuongcacanh at Vietnamese Wikipedia [[CC BY-SA 3.0](#)], [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Females may still exist in the wild. But it has been several years since Chinese scientists had a confirmed sighting of a wild Yangtze giant softshell turtle. In that case, the specimen [was eaten](#) before the scientists could arrive on the scene.

A Global Problem



Also nearly eaten to extinction, the Chinese giant salamander is now critically endangered. Photo credit: Petr Hamerník [[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)], [Wikimedia Commons](#)

Turtles are not the only species eaten to extinction. In 2016 an Oxford University professor compiled a list of [301 land mammal species](#) threatened with extinction by human culinary habits. Limited to mammals, that list does not include some of the creatures most affected by the market for exotic foods, including the Chinese giant salamander, Beluga sturgeon, and European eels. Thanks to CITES, most of these species will not be available for sale in the U.S. But travelers should know that just because something is on the menu, it's not always ethical — or legal — to eat it.

Feature image: critically endangered Beluga sturgeon, photo credit: Максим Яковлев [[CC BY-SA 4.0](#)], [Wikimedia Commons](#)

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