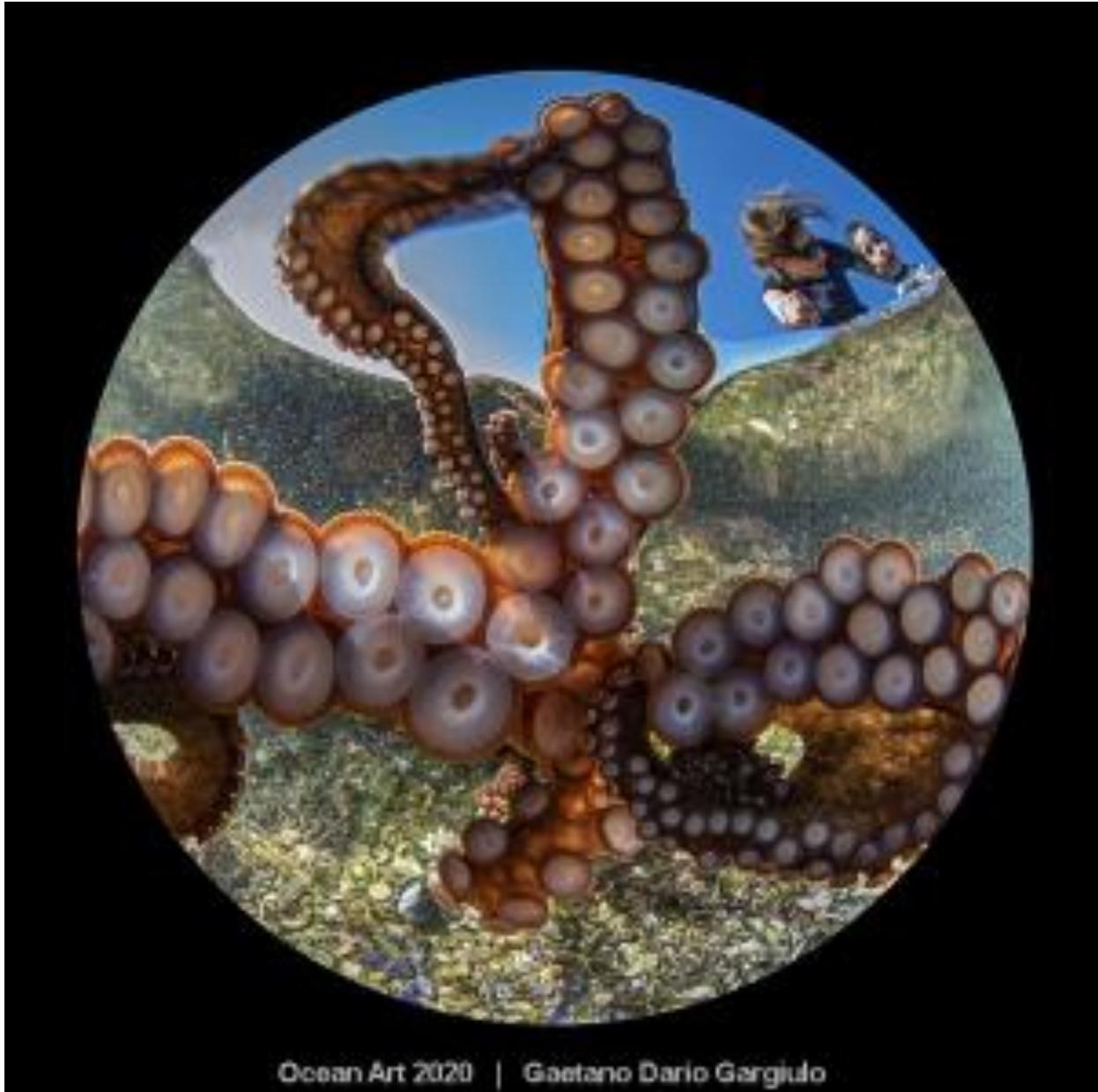


Victims in the shadows: octopuses, squids and cuttlefishes

From [There's an Elephant in the Room blog](#)

July 2021



Ocean Art 2020 | Gaetano Dario Gargiulo

Best of Show in the 9th Annual Ocean Art Underwater Photo

Contest <https://www.uwphotographyguide.com/ocean-art-contest-winners-2020>

Octopus are soft-bodied, eight-limbed molluscs of the order Octopoda. The order consists of some 300 species and is grouped within the class Cephalopoda with squids, cuttlefish, and nautiloids.

This blog was originally inspired by the many excellent articles I've read which provide insight to these fascinating creatures. These articles are always popular on social media, even amongst those who would think nothing of devouring these same individuals as a dietary indulgence.

As an animal rights blogger, however fascinating they are, I'm only too aware that alongside approximately [3 trillion](#) of their fellow water-dwellers every year, cephalopods are considered – like every other species on the planet – to exist solely for the use and exploitation of the most brutal and oppressive species that has ever existed. Humans.

So I'd like to stress something really important. There is no such thing as a 'food' animal. There is no relevant distinction between those whose corpses we casually toss into supermarket trolleys or whose charred remains lie on our plates, and the other creatures who share our homes or our lives. This also applies in the case of the cephalopod corpses that we, in our arrogance, treat as ingredients, and the stars of the videos and articles below. The concept of ['food' animals](#), like our [self-serving laws](#) and our invented conditions for our behaving with basic decency towards other species, are all a fabrication and lead to depravities we can scarcely imagine.

Disrespect hiding in plain sight

I started to look for statistics as I usually do, but even I was surprised to find that a search for the numbers 'slaughtered' yielded no useable information. I changed the search word to 'harvest' and guess what? No *wonder* the mainstream gives them little recognition and almost no moral consideration. The brutal and unnecessary terminating of the lives that, being [sentient](#), they value as we value our own, does not even merit the appropriate terminology for the atrocity we commit. The very mildest appropriate word for such brutality, is 'slaughter', not 'harvest'.

To add insult to injury, when I looked up the most basic scientific classification of octopuses, the category 'cooking time' came after their description, class, order and anatomy. Cooking time?! What the hell? Which is just one of the reasons why this blog fits into the 'Victims in the shadows' category. Harvested. Like wheat and corn, like potatoes and cabbages, with a helpful note about cooking time included. Not even a nod in the direction of their vast intelligence, their zest for life and their rights as inhabitants of our shared planet, rights NOT to be hijacked and categorised as our property by laws *we make up ourselves* to legitimise the bloodbath we leave in our wake.

Slaughter numbers and uses

Current statistics are hard to track down. For this reason I have used the most recent that I could source, but given the [dizzying escalation in the numbers](#) of all our species' victims, these numbers must be viewed as an extremely rough under-estimate. As with all aquatic creatures, statistics will exclude vast groups, significantly those caught as 'bycatch' when other species were the target. It is also indicative of our complete absence of respect for their lives that their brutal slaughter is measured in tonnage rather than individuals.

Octopuses – mainly used for their flesh. An estimated 350,000 tonnes taken from the wild annually with a 'harvest' weight that may vary between 750g and 3 kg, averages out at least 200 million individuals slaughtered in a year.

Squids – mainly used for their flesh with 'squid ink' being used as a food additive. This is a dark fluid that squids produce as a defence mechanism. An estimate of 1,600,000 tonnes taken from the wild annually at a typical 'market size' of 500g is at least 3.2 billion individuals.

Cuttlefishes – used by humans as food, as a source of ink, and for the cuttlebone (a dietary supplement for caged birds) An estimate of 500,000 tonnes taken from the wild annually. Average market weight estimated at 1 kg which translates to approximately 500,000,000 individuals. Total estimated number of individual cephalopods slaughtered annually is thus well in excess of 3.9 billion.

‘Farming’ lives for profit

Unlike many other aquatic individuals whose numbers captured from their wild habitats are supplemented by ‘farmed’ victims, by far the majority of current cephalopod victims are caught in the wild, with the business being so lucrative that the race is on amongst several countries to develop ways to ‘farm’ their bodies.

Late in 2019, in ‘Issues in Science and Technology’, [‘The Case Against Octopus Farming’](#) provided information about why prominent scientists consider it unethical to even *consider* pursuing methods of ‘farming’. It’s worth reading the article in its entirety.

‘Octopuses stand out among invertebrates for their complex behavior. They are capable of problem-solving, mimicking their surroundings using color changes that take place on a scale of seconds, outwitting predatory sharks, discriminating individual humans, engaging in playful behavior, and hunting in response to cooperative signals sent by fish. As these patterns of behavior suggest, octopuses (as well as some other cephalopods) have sophisticated nervous systems and large brains.

Given their exceptional abilities, one might ask whether humans should be eating octopus at all, but here we want to raise a different ethical question. As global demand for octopus grows, especially in affluent markets, so have efforts to farm them. We believe that octopuses are particularly ill-suited to a life in captivity and mass-production, for reasons both ethical and ecological.

Right now, the farming of octopus is constrained by the technology—it has been difficult to reliably keep animals alive through the early stages in their lives. But with further investments, research, and testing, the technology may well become available to farm octopus at an industrial scale. It is our hope that if such an option does become practical, society will recognize the serious welfare and environmental problems associated with such projects and octopus farming will be discouraged or prevented. Better still would be for governments, private companies, and academic institutions to stop investing in octopus farming now and to instead focus their efforts on achieving a truly sustainable and compassionate future for food production.

Similar challenges apply to efforts to farm squids as well as cuttlefishes but predictably, while consumers demand the corpses for their plates, there’s money to be made and that alone is incentive for exploiters to keep on trying to find ways to maximise their profits.

What has intelligence got to do with anything?

[Intelligence](#) is not and should never be the yardstick by which we measure the moral value of another individual of any species. If it were, then I doubt if any would dispute that large numbers of the human population might find their future at risk. The more the topic of intelligence is considered, the more abundantly clear it becomes that despite the limitations the majority of us have, whatever method by

which we decide to define intelligence, however nebulous, however narrow, is the yardstick by which we as a species, generally presume to measure every other. Just like the laws we make up to legitimise our outrageous behaviour towards our fellow beings, the qualifying criteria that we invent are hopelessly biased and anything but fair or objective.

However, in the case of octopuses, I've always been fascinated by their well-documented achievements. I have never promoted intelligence as a reason for consumers with an insatiable appetite for death, to stop killing and eating others who value their life. However in the accounts of the interactions and deeds of octopuses, I find individuals that I'd really like to get to know and appreciate; whose alien bodies, unknowable senses and different ways of seeing the world we share, would almost certainly prove instructive to those of our own species with open minds.

Look on in wonder and admiration

Finally I invite you to browse the following selection of links and videos. It would take a closed mind indeed to fail to be moved and intrigued by these. And when we learn to truly respect those who share their planet with us, the only logical thing we can do is to withdraw our own unnecessary demands for them to be harmed and become vegan.

1 – Let's start with an explanation of the image at the top of this piece.

This photo won best of show in the 9th Annual Ocean Art Underwater Photo Contest. It was taken by the octopus. We see anthropomorphic terms being used in articles about the photo; terms such as the octopus 'stealing' the camera, and suggestions that the photo was simply accidental. Perhaps it was, perhaps it wasn't. But perhaps the whole tone is an all too familiar attempt to retain the delusion of superiority by which our species butchers, chars and devours nonhumans without cause or conscience.

2 – How intelligent is a cephalopod?

'The soft-bodied cephalopods including octopus, cuttlefish, and squid are broadly considered to be the most cognitively advanced group of invertebrates. Previous research has demonstrated that these large-brained molluscs possess a suite of cognitive attributes that are comparable to those found in some vertebrates, including highly developed perception, learning, and memory abilities. Cephalopods are also renowned for performing sophisticated feats of flexible behaviour, which have led to claims of complex cognition such as causal reasoning, future planning, and mental attribution.'



3 – [Observations from Octopolis and Octlantis](#). by Peter Godfrey Smith

At Octlantis, I saw an interesting use of a found object. A small octopus was staring at one of our unmanned cameras from its den, and then went off camera and returned with a piece of dead sponge. It arranged this on the top of the den, as something between a roof and a helmet, and huddled beneath it, looking out. I am not sure that the little octopus was bothered by the camera, and wanted a barrier against its presence, but it did look that way.’ Read on at the link.

4 – *Wild Octopus Is Always Excited To See His Human Best Friend*

5 – [Suckers for learning: why octopuses are so intelligent](#)

‘Octopuses meet every criteria for the definition of intelligence: they show a great flexibility in obtaining information (using several senses and learning socially), in processing it (through discriminative and conditional learning), in storing it (through long-term memory) and in applying it toward both predators and prey.’

6- [Why Cuttlefish Are Smarter Than We Thought](#)

‘Cuttlefish are clever creatures, and squirting saltwater is not their only party trick. They’re [experts at camouflage](#), adjusting the colour and texture of their skin to match their environment. Plus, cuttlefish possess a range of [advanced cognitive abilities](#), including a [sophisticated memory](#), to help them [optimise their foraging behaviour](#) and adapt to changing prey conditions.

The ability to exert self-control varies across species. Rats, chickens, and pigeons find it difficult to resist food and can only delay gratification for a handful of seconds. Primates and brainy birds, meanwhile, can tolerate delays of up to several minutes to obtain food of higher quality or quantity.

7 – [Octopuses have two alternating sleep states](#)

“It is not possible to affirm that they are dreaming because they cannot tell us that, but our results suggest that during ‘active sleep’ the octopus might experience a state analogous to REM sleep, which is the state during which humans dream the most,” she says. “If octopuses indeed dream, it is unlikely that they experience complex symbolic plots like we do. ‘Active sleep’ in the octopus has a very short duration—typically from a few seconds to one minute.’ Read link for more info and video.

8 – [Octo in a cup by Pall Sigurdsson](#)

‘We spent a whole dive and most of our air saving this octopus from what was bound to be a cruel fate. The coconut octopus, also known as veined octopus, is born with the instinct to protect itself by creating a mobile home out of coconut or clam shells. This particular individual however has been trapped by their instincts and have made a home out of a plastic cup they found underwater. While a shell is a sturdy protection, a passing eel or flounder would probably swallow the cup with the octopus in it, most likely also killing the predator or weakening it to a point where it will be soon eaten by an even bigger fish. We found this particular octopus at about 20 meters under the water, we tried for a long time to give it shells hoping that it would trade the shell. Coconut octopus are famous for being very picky about which shells they keep so we had to try with many different shells before it found one to be acceptable.’ Follow link for video.

9 – *My Octopus Teacher*

A VERY highly acclaimed documentary available on Netflix and occasionally on other online sources, where a filmmaker forges an unusual friendship with an octopus living in a South African kelp forest, learning as the animal shares the mysteries of her world.

Note – some may question the use of the plurals ‘octopuses’, ‘squids’ and ‘cuttlefishes’ when we are more used to seeing the words without the ‘s’ at the end. Most of the terminology surrounding our use of others employs euphemisms about the substances taken from them to discourage consumer association with those who are paying for their indulgence with their lives. I try to use words that remind us that the topic here is the use – the UNNECESSARY use – of sentient individuals in very large numbers, rather than cooking ingredients.

Some links and references used in developing this article:

<https://www.facebook.com/media/set/?vanity=tamarakenneallyphotography&set=a.2952892041426359>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Octopus_aquaculture

<https://britishseafishing.co.uk/commercial-fishing-for-squid-and-cuttlefish/>

<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/23308249.2015.1026226>

<http://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/market-reports/resource-detail/en/c/1263830/>

<http://www.fao.org/in-action/globefish/market-reports/resource-detail/en/c/1253479/>

<https://www.uwphotographyguide.com/ocean-art-contest-winners-2020>

<http://www.fao.org/3/a0150e/A0150e05.pdf>

<http://www.fao.org/3/ca9229en/ca9229en.pdf>