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Intelligence

# Psychology study reveals why pescatarians prefer fish

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By Responsible Seafood Advocate

## Pescatarians' preference for fish over terrestrial animal meat rooted in perceived distance, study finds

A new study from the University of Stirling reveals why pescatarians eat fish but not land animal meat: The perceived distance between humans and marine life.

“When we do not know much about someone or something we think of it in more abstract and general terms because we lack information,” said Carol Jasper, co-author of the study. “For our sample of pescatarians, this meant that they felt less emotionally connected to marine animals than they felt to land animals with whom we share some more obvious similarities.”

The team applied the construal-level theory of psychological distance to delve into how this distance is formed and experienced. This theory suggests that our understanding and interpretation of people, animals, objects or situations vary based on how much we know about them. According to the researchers, this social distance seemed to be maintained by spatial distance.

“We feel distanced from marine animals because we rarely see them,” said Jasper. “As we do not share a common space with fish, they are, as one participant put it: ‘Out of sight, out of mind.’ We believe that this distance on multiple levels – social and spatial – can help us understand why pescatarians choose



A new study from the University of Stirling reveals why pescatarians eat fish but not land animal meat: The perceived distance between humans and marine life. Photo by [Malidate Van](https://www.pexels.com/photo/grilled-salmon-fish-on-top-of-grilled-vegetables-842142/) (<https://www.pexels.com/photo/grilled-salmon-fish-on-top-of-grilled-vegetables-842142/>).

to eat fish, but not other animals like cows and chickens.”

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“We argued that the two-fold distance – social and spatial – led our participants to hold more negative attitudes of the cognitive abilities of fish, serving as an explanation as to why our pescatarians find it easier to morally justify consuming marine animals but not land animals,” said Maja Cullen, postgraduate researcher and primary author of the study. “Nonetheless, nearly all participants expressed that they closely identified with the ethics of vegetarians or vegans and many of them expressed their intentions to remove marine animals from their diets in the future, with many questioning the logic of their own perceptions.”

The research was inspired by previous work that identified experiences of cognitive dissonance in meat eaters. Cognitive dissonance is a state of mental discomfort in which a person holds conflicting beliefs or acts in a way that contradicts their beliefs. For example, many people express that they care about animals, yet they regularly eat them too.

“We were curious to explore whether pescatarians experience cognitive dissonance in relation to their marine animal consumption and if so, whether they adopt certain strategies to overcome this mental discomfort,” said Jasper. “We did find support for the existence of cognitive dissonance within our sample. Ascribing fewer capabilities to marine animals was thus one of the strategies our sample used to alleviate their experience of cognitive dissonance.”

The researchers suggest that the plant-based alternatives industry may benefit from this research by gaining deeper insight into the mindset and needs of fish consumers, enabling them to tailor their products toward this specific demographic.

**[Read the full study \(https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2024.2328037\)](https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14780887.2024.2328037)**.

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