

Putting Your Best Fish Forward

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Should you require all seafood imported into and sold in your jurisdiction meet the standards of an ecolabelling scheme?

Globally, fish stocks have been in decline for decades because of commercial overfishing and unsustainable fishing methods. To help remedy this, ecolabels have been used since the 1990s as a market-based incentive for stakeholders to make more sustainable choices in seafood acquisition. Ecolabels have the goal of creating an environmentally friendly seafood market which puts the power of consumer choice at the forefront of the movement. Ecolabels were originally introduced for wild-caught fish, but have recently been added to aquaculture farmed fish, providing a certification for traditional fishing in addition to the new, emerging food technology of aquaculture.

Several ecolabels are available, the most common for wild-caught fish being the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), accounting for 46% of all wild-caught ecolabelled fish. The new Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is leading the sustainable fishing movement in the aquaculture arena. Below is a figure from thisfish.info comparing the four most common ecolabels found in Canada [3].

	MSC.ORG	Ocean Wise	Seafood WATCH	SeaChoice.org for healthy oceans
Vulnerability of species to overfishing	✓	✓	✓	✓
Health & status of fish population	✓	✓	✓	✓
Volume of bycatch or unwanted fish	✓	✓	✓	✓
Impact of fishing method on habitat	✓	✓	✓	✓
Effectiveness of fisheries management	✓	✓	✓	✓
Use of eco-label on seafood products	✓	✓	X	✓
Traceability of products to source	✓	X	X	X
Certification by third party	✓	X	X	X

Figure 1. displays comparison of various Canadian ecolabelling schemes [3].

There are three major factors to consider regarding making ecolabelling a legal requirement for seafood sold in your jurisdiction: 1) Will this move help your economy? 2) Will this move help the environment? and 3) Will this move help the public's perception of your administration?

ECONOMY: When analyzing potential economic impact, considering all possible stakeholders (consumers, fishers, managers of fisheries, scientists, policy-makers) is a must. A Canadian study shows that nearly all stakeholders agree on the potential market benefits and consider ecolabelling as a way to coerce more consumers to eat more (albeit sustainable) fish [1]. However, it is important to consider that conflicting label information may confuse consumers, leading them to purchase unlabeled merchandise anyway. Additionally, the cost of being certified leads to a potential barrier to entry for smaller fisheries and fisheries from developing nations which cannot afford to fish sustainably enough to meet certification standards [1].

Other information presented on seafood labels can influence purchase behavior, such as whether the fish is wild-caught vs farmed or if the fish was acquired locally/domestically vs in other countries [2]. If a consumer believes wild fishing is worse on fish stocks, the ecolabel will be more powerful on wild-caught fish than on farmed fish. Studies have conflicting conclusions, dependent mostly on country, of whether consumers in general see aquaculture as more environmentally damaging than wild-caught, though the Canadian seems to frown upon aquaculture and are more likely to purchase wild-caught fish. These factors are important points to consider when you choose which ecolabel you require and for what species of fish the ecolabel is required [2].

Ultimately, customers are willing to pay a premium cost for ecolabelled seafood, so long as the cost difference is minimal, thus adding money input to the fish consumption market.

ENVIRONMENT: Most studies focus on consumer/stakeholder view of ecolabelling and their chance of purchasing these premium products, and so there is not much data that can point to the effectiveness of ecolabelling in reducing environmental effects of commercial fishing. This is a complex topic, as many factors are at play and there has not been much quantitative research in the area [1].

In speaking with stakeholders, it has become obvious that the credibility of the different ecolabels is a major concern. Customers must trust the ecolabel for the scheme to work. Education is key regarding customer trust, which will cost your administration more money, time, and effort to ensure the public receives complete and factual information regarding ecolabels. Clarity must come from the administration if customers are forced to choose ecolabelled products [1, 2].

In the ~20 years since ecolabelling began, many new ecolabels have appeared on products. Scholars suggest that having more ecolabel options increase accessibility, balancing out any concerns about credibility as more species and systems become certified. Therefore, choosing more than one or two ecolabels under new law could prove beneficial.

PUBLIC OUTLOOK: There are several different attitudes toward ecolabelling schemes: optimist, skeptic, pragmatist, and improver (see figure 2 for some comments made by various attitudes). It is hard to say which category different stakeholder groups fall into, as all individual stakeholders share different points of view. Key takeaways are that not all fishers agree that ecolabelling schemes are helping the fishers in all areas of their work (e.g. lost gear, increase in pollution). Some fishers and environmental groups (ENGOS) say that ecolabelling schemes are beneficial in that they pressure fisheries to shift to more sustainable fishing methods. Scientists and fisheries generally agree that aquaculture can help reduce the rapid decline of fish stock health, and that ecolabelling might help some stakeholders feel better about aquaculture, as the ecolabel requires sustainability to be practiced at the fish farm.

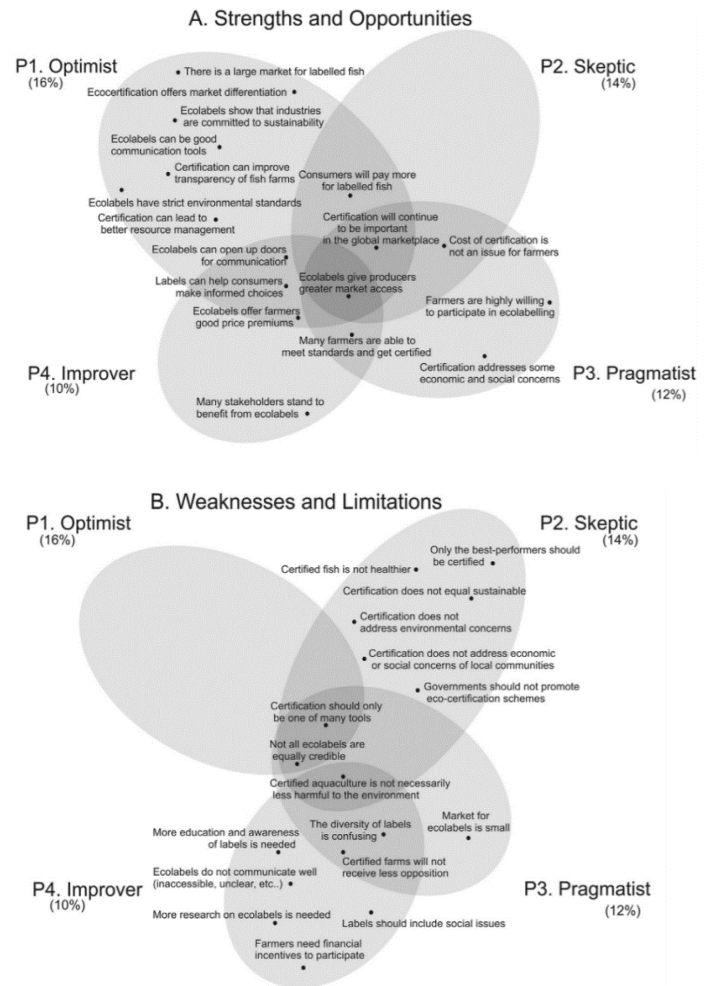


Figure 2. Comments from different stakeholder groups regarding ecolabel schemes [1].

Moving beyond those that have an economic stake, moving to a legally required ecolabelling scheme could show the public you are meeting platform objectives of a greener world, but will require effort to educate the public on the benefits of ecolabels and what they mean to reduce confusion, and increase clarity.

This information has been provided as a summary of key research relevant to the field to help you choose the best policy to pursue.

References: 1: Marine Policy <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.09.037> 2: Food Policy <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.foodpol.2013.10.002> 3: This Fish <https://thisfish.info/ecorating/>

Audience: policy-makers in charge of a large enough jurisdiction to make actionable change across many people (i.e. more than just a city)

Potential contact:

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