

SUSTAINABLE, REALLY?

Sustainable seafood needs to meet the triple bottom line of social, economic, and environmental sustainability. Right now, certification prioritizes environmentalism over equity.

Russell Chiong, April 2019

As consumers consider environmental impacts an increasingly important part of their food-buying decisions, they look to labels like OceanWise and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) that let them know if their seafood is 'sustainable'. However, both the MSC and OceanWise are primarily ecological initiatives, where standards regarding the socio-

economic impacts of the products they certify or recommend are often inadequate. While MSC has looked to improve in this area,¹ its new criteria leave room for improvement. Current certification programs fail to adequately support small-scale fishers, involve local stakeholders, or consider the socioeconomic effects of fisheries practices.

CERTIFICATION CHALLENGES



Processing of seafood considered 'Best Choice' under the Seafood Watch advisory, by prison labour.¹



Certifying seafood as sustainable is **costly**,³ and can prevent small-scale fishers from gaining access to wider markets and helping **commercial-grade** operations overtake them.⁴

Seafood can be labelled as 'sustainable' even if it's produced with **prison** labour at **below** the minimum wage.²



Wide use of the same sustainability criteria **limits community** involvement. Certification often **ignores those** who are actually **affected** by unsustainable fishing or harvest practices.³

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS



Funding

Third-party recommenders and certification organizations should support local fishers so that their programs don't replace them with industrial-scale fishing efforts. External funding should be sought to support audits of working conditions to avoid conflicts of interest.



Standards

Sustainable seafood certification and recommendation initiatives need to include broader socio-economic impacts beyond strictly defined forced and child labour. Partnering with NGOs and other organizations that specialize in human rights can ensure the creation and enforcement of effective criteria.



Community Involvement

Local consultations and community-based regulation should be integrated into global certification initiatives both in terms of conservation goals and social criteria (e.g. working conditions). Support should be provided for exploited workers, and assessments should be an independent platform through which they can speak about unethical or detrimental practices.

Better certification practices can improve social, environmental, and economic sustainability for those that participate. By combining current strategies with those of community-based regulation, we can see improvements at a wider scale. Ensuring that fisheries are both environmentally and socio-economically sustainable requires stakeholder involvement, worker support systems, and partnership with organizations that specialize in this area.

Literature Cited

1: White, C. (2018). MSC addresses forced labor, process issues in standards update. *SeafoodSource*. Retrieved from: <https://www.seafoodsource.com/news/environment-sustainability/msc-addresses-forced-labor-process-issues-in-standards-update>
 2: Clabots, B. (2017). The Disturbing Irony Of Using Prison Labor For 'Sustainable' Seafood. *The Establishment*. Retrieved from: <https://theestablishment.co/the-disturbing-irony-of-using-prison-labor-for-sustainable-seafood-92c83ba6fd14/> April 12, 2019
 3: Vanderveest, P. (2007). Certification and communities: Alternatives for regulating the environmental and social impacts of shrimp farming. *World Development*, 35(7), 1152-1171. doi:10.1016/j.worlddev.2006.12.002
 4: Bush, S. R. (2018). Understanding the potential of eco-certification in salmon and shrimp aquaculture value chains. *Aquaculture*, 493, 376-383. doi:10.1016/j.aquaculture.2017.07.027

Cover Image Retrieved from: Marco Mazza.