



SCIENCE & SUSTAINABILITY FORUM

Advancing Science and Management for Sustainable Ocean Resources



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Scientists Challenge Seafood Ecolabeling & Sustainability Standards

Science & Sustainability Forum scientists and managers say ecolabelling standards are being misapplied in coastal fisheries and create market barriers that impact many fisheries.

New Orleans, Louisiana – November 5, 2014 – Senior scientists and fishery managers from leading fishing nations concluded three days of talks on the status of fisheries and sustainability of seafood at the fourth annual Science and Sustainability Forum (SSF) which called for the re-evaluation of seafood ecolabelling guidelines that many say are being misapplied particularly in small scale fisheries and coastal communities. A major concern is that ecolabelling is creating market barriers for coastal fisheries and communities.

“What we have seen is that many of these [ecolabelling] schemes are creating difficulties for the access of small scale fisheries particularly in developing states to international markets,” said Fabio Hazin, Professor of the Fisheries and Aquaculture Department of Universidade Federal Rural of Pernambuco. *“This is a very worrying trend and we have to come up with a solution for that.”*

Forum participants noted that even in developed countries there are many well-managed fisheries which simply do not have funds to go through a private third-party ecolabelling scheme, and many question the need and additional costs of ecolabelling, especially when many management systems already have a thorough scientific review process. Hundreds of millions of dollars are spent on fisheries management, which involves extensive data collection, stock assessments, and teams of scientists and managers. Several forum participants discussed new programs at the national and state level to provide assurances that their fisheries are sustainably managed and conform with the principles within the FAO guidelines for ecolabelling.

“Only ten percent of global fisheries have gone through private ecolabelling programs,” said Thor Lassen, president of Ocean Trust and a co-convenor and principle organizer for the Forum. *“There simply is not enough money to certify all fisheries in the world, nor does it make sense. We have to be more pragmatic when it comes to the ecolabelling of seafood products.”*

Globally, fish production has been steadily increasing for many decades and per capita fish consumption has more than doubled since 1973 from an estimated average 8.3% yearly growth in aquaculture during the period 1970 – 2010. This surge makes it the fastest growing food production system as reported by Lahsen Ababouch, FAO’s Division Director for Policy and Economics, who presented a global review on the management and status of fisheries and aquaculture.

Ray Hilborn, University of Washington School of Aquatic and Fishery Sciences, reported that where we have data and fisheries are actively managed, stocks are being managed sustainably, refuting many claims expressed by environmental non-governmental organizations (eNGOs). As Hilborn noted, *“in each case, science supports the ability of the existing management systems to sustain food from the sea:*

- *Overfishing is declining where fisheries are managed*
- *Marine Protected Areas do not improve fisheries yields where fisheries are well managed*
- *Environmental impacts of fishing are less than alternative food production systems*
- *Certification no longer seems to be about sustainability, but eNGO values of “acceptable” environmental impact”*

In light of this progress, John Sackton from SeafoodNews.com asked: *“Why are the public and media so wrong about fisheries?”* Steve Cadrin, president of AIFRB, noted, *“Misinformation needs to be corrected because an imbalanced agenda threatens the human aspects of sustainability.”*

Several speakers challenged misleading information from NGOs regarding menhaden fisheries, the status of stocks, and bycatch, particularly in Oceana’s 2014 bycatch report. According to the Regional Fishery Management Councils, the report should be retracted. Benny Gallaway, representing LGL Ecological Research Associates, suggested it should be *“carefully evaluated, especially when many of the claims are complete fabrications without any basis in fact.”*

Defining sustainability is a large part of the problem. As Brian Rothschild, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth School for Marine Science and Technology, pointed out *“the language of sustainability is fuzzy...a concept that is constantly changing rather than a well-defined goal. What we need,”* Rothschild continued *“is a concrete definition with clear performance measures and minimum ambiguity that tracks environmental change,”* which Dick Beamish, the former AIFRB president and Department of Fisheries and Oceans Canada scientist, expanded upon in his discussion on the link between Pacific salmon abundance and climate regime shifts in the ocean.

How we measure sustainability was further discussed by many speakers who pointed out that sustainability is a process more appropriately tracked by evaluating the management and stock assessment system rather than the status of a stock (overfished) or fishing level (overfishing) at any given point in time. Programs for assessing the conformance of management systems to FAO sustainability criteria were presented by Ocean Trust, NOAA, and others.

Speakers also noted the mismatch of standards developed for data-rich, large-scale, single-species fisheries and small-scale, coastal, mixed fisheries often characterized as highly productive, short-lived and environmentally driven.

“Many sustainability standards in the National Standard 1 Guidelines of the Magnuson Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act and many guidelines for the ecolabelling of fishery products developed for large-scale, commercial fisheries are not suited for small-scale, coastal fisheries,” concluded Steve Cadrin, AIFRB. *“These mismatched standards jeopardize all aspects of sustainability. Alternative standards that reflect and recognize the successful cooperative management of coastal fisheries are needed.”*

The forum also reviewed the status of Gulf of Mexico fisheries and management systems that are producing sustainable seafood. *“The overall status of stocks in the Gulf are in the best shape they have been in the last 20-30 years,”* said Roy Crabtree, Regional Administrator of NOAA Fisheries Southeast Regional Office. *“The stocks seem to be responding to management and are coming back.”*

At the state level, Louisiana’s program presented an innovative approach to sustaining its coastal fisheries. Randy Pausina, Assistant Secretary for Fisheries at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries (LDWF), and his staff illustrated through several presentations how coastal states can integrate international sustainability criteria and tools into a comprehensive program for the sustainability of its seafood products and fisheries through partnerships, public outreach, product assurance, professionalism and traceability (www.wlf.louisiana.gov).

The forum, the fourth in its series, was sponsored by [Ocean Trust](#), [American Institute of Fishery Research Biologists](#), [Bonefish Grill](#), [Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries](#), [Gulf States Marine Fisheries Commission](#), [Omega Protein](#), and [Sea Port Products](#).

About the Science & Sustainability Forum

The Science & Sustainability Forum is an international network of professional fishery scientists and fishery management organizations and agencies which meets to promote effective management of fisheries and provide factual guidance based on the best scientific and unbiased information available. Forum participants have included representatives from the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), World Bank, World Fish Center, NOAA Fisheries, Fisheries and Oceans Canada, Iceland Ministry of Industries & Innovation, Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs Norway, Institute of Marine Research Norway, New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industries, International Council for the Exploration of the Seas, Pacific Research Institute for Fisheries Vladivostok, Northwest Atlantic Fisheries Organization, Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, Southern Indian Ocean Deepsea Fishers Association, New England Fisheries Management Council, University of Massachusetts Dartmouth, University of Washington, Rutgers University, University of Florida Gainesville, Universidade Federal Rural de Pernambuco Brazil, International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, World Wildlife Fund, Audubon Nature Institute, AIFRB and Ocean Trust.

About Ocean Trust

Ocean Trust is an award-winning ocean conservation foundation building science, conservation and industry partnerships for the sustainability of the oceans. Its program focus includes fisheries sustainability, wildlife protection and environmental restoration in partnership with coastal communities dependent on the sea. Ocean Trust serves as secretariat for SSF. www.oceantrust.org

About American Institute of Fishery Research Biologists

AIFRB is a professional organization established to promote conservation and proper utilization of fishery resources through the use of fishery and related sciences. The role of the Institute is the professional development and performance of its members, and the recognition of their achievements. AIFRB is a cosponsor of the Science and Sustainability Forum. www.aifrb.org