

# Western Consumer and Business Behavior Thwarting Eco-labeling of Tropical Fisheries

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The eco-labeling of fish and seafood products from certified fisheries is a concept introduced by Western NGOs and civil society to tropical developing countries, with the objective of bringing about improved fisheries management and environmental conservation, areas that Westerners perceive to be either mismanaged or unmanaged. Success in implementing the concept rests ultimately on the purchasing power of Western consumers, who theoretically energize the entire process, and fish wholesalers and retail businesses, which generally support eco-labeling to both obtain premium prices and appear 'eco-friendly'. However, the concept is undermined by both the confused behavior of Western consumers and the unethical behavior of business.

**Key Words :** Environmental Conservation, Neo-liberalism, Resources Management, Small-scale Fisheries, Sustainability

## 1. Introduction

The eco-labeling of fish and seafood products from certified fisheries is a controversial Western neo-liberal concept that aims to use the 'power of the market' to promote responsible capture and culture fisheries management and coastal-marine environmental conservation, particularly in tropical countries, which are generally perceived by Westerners as mismanaged. The main stated motive of fisheries certification and product eco-labeling is to benefit the environment and renewable resources by providing environmental information that would enable consumers to express environmental/ecological concerns through their choice of products (UNCED 1992). This is based on the long-established concept of marketing to bring about social change, which has been used in Western societies since the 1970s (Kotler and Zaltman 1971).

In contrast, however, in tropical countries, the targeted beneficiaries of self-appointed Western altruism, a hidden agenda is widely perceived to be Western control over resources needed to supply its markets (Ruddle 2008). As a consequence,

fisheries certification and fish product eco-labeling have received scant support in Asia (Gardiner and Viswanathan 2004), and have remained largely driven by large Western retailers and civil society, with little involvement of tropical country governments.

More importantly, the assumption that Western consumer belief in environmental conservation and resource sustainability is the principal foundation of any fisheries supply chain is illusory. In reality, there is a range of consumer beliefs, and, as demonstrated by recent survey research in the UK and the USA, many consumers are confused by eco-labeling, in part because of unethical behavior of retailers, wholesalers, fish dealers, and fish processors.

## 2. Consumer Behavior

The concept of eco-labeling rests on the assumption that consumers are willing to pay a "green premium" on goods to satisfy their belief in environmental conservation and resource sustainability. However, a serious weakness in this approach is the large difference in consumer

attitudes within and among countries, because many consumer decisions will be based on value for money, taste and convenience, rather than on altruism (UNEP 2009). Indeed, motives expressed by consumers, as well as fish retail businesses and producers, will not be closely related to sustainable fisheries, since a preference for eco-labeled products depends mainly on price (Johnston et al 2001). In the USA, for example, although there is an increasing public awareness of sustainability, a 2010 consumer attitude survey found that only 21 percent of those interviewed could identify a sustainable product, and only 12 percent could name specific companies as having made statements about sustainable sourcing (Anon 2011a). Consumer awareness of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) eco-label increased more than 2.5 times between 2008 and 2010, according to consumer research in North America and Western Europe, where 23 percent of adults surveyed recognized it (Anon 2010a). However, there is much confusion among supermarket customers regarding seafood and eco-labels. In a recent UK survey (DEFRA 2011), which focused only on the MSC label, it was found that 37 percent of respondents had not heard of MSC. Further, although 70 percent of those surveyed agreed that buying sustainably produced fish is important, some 40 percent do not buy it because they are confused by the labeling. Those who purchase sustainably produced fish did so for ecological reasons, or to 'feel good', whereas those who did not do so had either not heard of the MSC logo, considered eco-labeled products too expensive, or purchased other products out of habit (DEFRA 2011).

In addition, it is claimed that consumers are being misled and sometimes deliberately deceived by both the contents of the eco-labels on seafood products and the renaming of fish (Anon 2010b; Anon 2011b). Many instances of outright fraud have been documented (Jacquet and Pauly 2008), where the lack of consumer familiarity with fish products plus loopholes in labeling regulations encourage wholesalers, distributors and retailers to deliberately mislabel in order to increase profits. An absence of government regulation has allowed private eco-labels to capture a major market share. But such eco-labels do not provide full information on sustainability, and are often contradictory. For example, many provide inadequate information regarding environmental standards, social responsibility, international law, and transparency of the product labeled, such that some labels can entice customers to purchase products sourced from either ecologically unsustainable or socially deleterious fisheries (Jacquet and Pauly

2008; Anon 2010b). The result is that confused consumers pay exorbitantly, and are unable to make ecologically appropriate purchases. Deeply unethical as the windfall profits to the perpetrators of fraud are, the consequences of mislabeling and renaming of fish products go much further, and include economic losses to governments, increased pressure and loss of vulnerable aquatic resources, the subverting of ecological campaigns, and human health issues (Jacquet and Pauly 2008).

Revenue on sales of fish labeled as sustainable increased from 70 million GBP (2007) to 178 million GBP (2009) (The Cooperative Bank 2010). Although such a large increase could suggest that consumer purchases of sustainably sourced seafood have increased dramatically, despite an economic recession, and thus reflect people's fundamental ethical values, it might reflect also corporate and environmentalists separate drives that have converged in a large increase in both supplies and 'ethically labeled' seafood products (O'Riordan 2011). In other words, "[a]re consumers really selecting fish labeled as ethical, or are they just being supplied with it?" (O'Riordan 2011:39)."

### **3. The behavior of fish wholesale and retail businesses**

The motivations of fish wholesale and retail businesses are mixed, ranging from corporate social responsibility and long-term planning to secure stable supplies, to the chance of obtaining premium price retail sales and the avoidance of bad publicity that would result from sourcing from unsustainable fishery practices (UNEP 2009). By "shaming retailers into embracing eco-seafood initiatives" (Anon 2010b:16) pressure from advocacy groups, particularly Greenpeace, also played a major role in forcing the acceptance of only those fish species taken using sustainable practices. For example, 'Costco', a large food retailing company, revised its seafood sourcing policy under pressure from a 'campaign' against it by Greenpeace (Anon 2011c). In a seafood guide prepared for Japanese retailers and consumers, Greenpeace requires seafood buyers to ban the purchase of 15 species that it considers under threat (Anon 2010c). The stated motive for this was that "[i]t was up to supermarkets, restaurant chains and consumers to take action where politicians have not, only then will future generations have healthy oceans" (Anon 2010d:14). ClientEarth, an environmental law organization, claims that major British food retailers have been making misleading environmental claims on seafood products, and

threatened action against them under consumer protection laws were the items either not removed from sale, or the supermarkets' claims proven to be valid (Anon 2011d).

#### 4. Conclusion

Although the power of international corporations engaged in the fish retail trade to drive their wishes through their supply chain is strong, it is far from certain that retailer statements and the intentions of customers in Western countries are enough to influence change in poorly managed tropical fisheries. There is also the lingering suspicion that certification is a smoke-and-mirrors performance staged by Western retailers to pre-empt the growing 'fisheries and marine ecological' concerns of consumers without really addressing the fundamental causes of overfishing. This is also heightened by the apparent insincerity of many consumer expressions of concern, and fraudulent business behavior. The hypocrisy of Western NGOs demanding adherence to laws, transparency and good ecological behavior in the policy they dictate to tropical small-scale fishermen and associated business people, while at the same time failing to rectify dishonest behavior in their own society, does not go unnoticed. Small wonder that eco-labeling has received neither widespread nor wholehearted support in Asian tropical countries.

It is unlikely certification and eco-labeling will contribute much to the general improvement of fisheries management. Rather, if that is the ultimate goal then fisheries management itself should be the direct focus. That alone is a sufficiently complex and controversial topic, without complicating it further by embedding it within the rubric of 'eco-labeling'.

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