

275 of 657 DOCUMENTS

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Barriers sinking small-scale fishermen: experts; UBC duo claim big fish operations are getting the breaks

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BUSINESS IN VANCOUVER

Two University of British Columbia researchers have debunked sacrosanct sustainable seafood eco-labelling programs.

In recent articles published in respected academic journals, fish scientists Jennifer Jacquet and **Daniel Pauly** lambaste the programs as being ineffective, misguided and inherently tilted in favour of large commercial fishing operations and against those that operate in boats 15 metres or less.

They argue that small fishing operations are generally more sustainable because they're more likely to selectively catch fish and don't use destructive fishing methods like seabed trawling.

They also don't have the research budgets of their larger counterparts. Those budgets enable larger operators to pay fees to qualify for sustainable seafood certification.

The duo's Funding priorities: Big Barriers to Small Scale Fisheries, appears in the August edition of Conservation Biology.

Rising environmental consciousness in mainstream society has helped spawn numerous sustainable seafood eco-labelling programs during the past decade.

THEY INCLUDE:

- the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program;
- the David Suzuki Foundation-supported SeaChoice program; and
- the Marine Stewardship Council's certification program.

These programs have flourished because some get funding from larger charitable foundations and because consumers perceive them as worthy initiatives.

But Jacquet and Pauly say sustainable fishing advocates should not rely on wallet cards that identify which fish are allegedly being caught sustainably.

The duo said those advocates should instead focus their criticism on the fuel subsidies that most fishing nations give to their fishing industries.

Activists are lobbying for state governments, which are World Trade Organization members, to agree to end fishing industry fuel subsidies. The WTO will be a forum for those negotiations.

Jacquet said those subsidies disproportionately help larger fishing operations because they use more fuel.

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She pointed to research from fellow UBC researcher Rashid Sumaila, which shows that the Canadian government provided \$138 million in fuel subsidies to fishermen in 2000, the last year for which Sumaila has data. The subsidies come when fishermen file their taxes.

"Small-scale fisheries in the developed world, in the tropics, are being hedged out of the marketplace by well-intentioned eco-labelling and wallet cards, because they can't compete in the global market," Jacquet said. "They're very data-poor, so they can't be included in eco-label programs."

But sustainable fishing program representatives dispute Jacquet and Pauly's claims.

"It's misinformation that the larger fisheries are necessarily less sustainable than the smaller fisheries," said Seattle-based Kerry Coughlin, who is the director of communications, Americas, for the global Marine Stewardship Council.

Coughlin confirmed that fishermen must pay fees to get MSC sustainability certification for their catches. But she said the money pays for independent third-party investigators.

Roughly 1,700 products in 38 countries carry MSC eco-logos, and the program is established so that all certified products can be traced each step in the supply chain to ensure they were caught sustainably.

Coughlin stressed that the MSC certifies products, not fishermen.

Other sustainable seafood advocates agree with Coughlin that the issue is far too complicated to reduce to a simple, "small equals good, big equals bad" maxim.

"You've got hundreds of different fisheries using many different kinds of gear all around the planet. There are so many permutations of scale. It's not big versus small," said Bill Wareham, who is the David Suzuki Foundation's senior marine conservation specialist.

Wareham said his foundation does its own research and doesn't charge any fees. Its wallet cards, which are downloadable at www.seachoice.com, list seafood species and regions and divide them into three categories: best choice, some concerns and avoid.

Vancouver Aquarium Ocean Wise program assistant Kelly Johnson said her program gets much of its research from the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch program.

She said her program helps consumers identify sustainable seafood by allowing local restaurateurs to put the Ocean Wise logo on menus next to seafood that the program deems to be sustainable.

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