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## Consumers seek certainty about sustainable seafood labelling

Nelson Bennett / Business in Vancouver  
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Alasdair Lindop, acting science lead, and Deirdre Finn, program manager, are sustainable seafood experts with the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program. Photo: Rob Kruyt

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If you are a conscientious consumer, you may look for sustainable seafood labels when buying fish or ordering seafood in a restaurant.

You may look for the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) label when buying tuna in the grocery store, for example.

You may even use the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise or Monterey Bay Aquarium's Seafood Watch apps to tell you which restaurants use eco-certified seafood suppliers.

And you may be forgiven for sometimes getting confused.

There is such a welter of eco-labelling and recommendation programs for seafood these days – some of them conflicting with each other – that it can be hard for the average consumer to know which to trust, especially given the mislabelling and outright fraud that have been identified by eco-watchdogs like Oceana.

Fraser River sockeye? Good, say the MSC and Ocean Wise. Bad, says the Greenpeace red list.

B.C. farmed Atlantic salmon? Good, says the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC). Bad, say SeaChoice and Ocean Wise.

Meanwhile, Seafood Watch puts B.C. farmed Atlantic salmon somewhere in between, with a yellow rating, meaning it is a “good alternative” to other farmed or wild salmon that may not be as sustainable.

Karen Wristen of the Living Oceans Society, one of the partners in the SeaChoice program – which last year got out of consumer labelling to focus on working directly with retailers – said SeaChoice and its partner organizations continue to recommend MSC- and ASC-certified products, although they have concerns about both allowing “non-conformities with standards” to remain unresolved.

SeaChoice disagrees, for example, with the ASC’s recent certification of B.C. farmed salmon, saying it is not following some of its own standards on things like sea lice control.

“We think it’s very important to have certified product on the market and to help the consumers differentiate, but you’re not helping consumers differentiate product if you’re not applying your standards the way it was written,” Wristen said.

The disagreement among competing conservation groups over eco-certification is just one of the problems that Ray Hilborn, a fisheries scientist at the University of Washington, has with the whole eco-labelling movement.

He thinks they may be muddying the waters, while giving consumers a false sense of security that the eco-certified fish they eat is necessarily more sustainable than fish caught by small operators that aren’t certified.

“Look at Alaska pollock,” Hilborn said. “It’s certified by the MSC. It’s on the yellow label for Monterey Bay – a good alternative but not a best choice. And it’s red-listed by Greenpeace.”

He also points to New Zealand hoki. It is MSC certified but rated “do not eat” by New Zealand conservation group Forest and Bird’s seafood guide, which is endorsed by World Wildlife Fund’s (WWF) New Zealand chapter. Given that the MSC was created by the WWF, the conflict essentially pits the local chapter of the WWF against its parent organization.

## Eco-certification, a Canadian story

To a great extent, Canada can be blamed, or credited, for the sustainable seafood labelling movement. The movement grew out of the collapse of the Atlantic cod fishery in the early 1990s, Hilborn explains.

He estimates that, between 2007 and 2009, U.S. philanthropic foundations like the David and Lucile Packard Foundation and Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation spent roughly \$160 million a year on conservation non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and fisheries science. Hilborn was among the many scientists who benefited from that funding.

In an effort to do what some governments were failing to do – protect fish stocks from overfishing – some conservation groups developed eco-certification and seafood guide schemes, like the MSC and Seafood Watch. In doing so, they introduced into fisheries management a new player – the consumer.

Pressure was brought to bear on retailers and restaurants to sell or serve only certified seafood, which in turn put pressure on the fishing industry to apply for sustainable seafood certification. Hilborn now sees it as a kind of industry unto itself.

“MSC makes money selling their label,” he said. “Lots of retailers pay NGOs to tell them what they can buy, so it’s become a profit centre for the NGOs as well. It’s certainly a concern that I have – that it’s a business now.”

The MSC generated \$33.5 million in revenue in its 2016-17 fiscal year, 76% of which – \$25.5 million – came from logo licensing. The MSC says it doesn’t profit from its fees. Fees paid for third-party assessments, for example, go to the assessors, not the MSC.

“Every penny is reinvested in the MSC program,” the organization states.

Hilborn concedes there have been improvements in the way the world’s fisheries are managed since the 1990s, but he credits governments, international conventions and better fisheries science and management around the world for most of those improvements, not eco-labelling.

Only about 12% of the world’s marine catch is MSC certified. And MSC certification tends to be aimed mainly at First World consumers.

“This is simply something to make rich people feel good,” Hilborn said. “For most of the people of the world, worrying about whether there’s a bycatch of sharks in their tuna is a luxury they can’t afford.

“What people don’t realize is the abundance of fish stocks is increasing in much of the world – certainly all of the developed world, where fisheries are managed – with the exception of the Mediterranean.”

In Canada, the U.S., Australia, New Zealand, northern Europe, Russia and Japan, many principal stocks are increasing, Hilborn said.

“Why are they increasing? Because governments have instituted science programs, management programs and started actually intensively managing their fisheries.”

He concedes that conservation groups have had a positive impact by bringing public pressure to bear on certain overfished stocks such as the Atlantic bluefin tuna. But for the most part, he said, bringing the consumer into the picture has not had a significant impact on the way the world’s fisheries are managed.

“In my personal experience, almost all MSC certification has not changed how the fisheries actually worked,” he said. “All they’ve done is require all sorts of paperwork to be done, for scientific studies to be done. But they haven’t changed what’s happening on the ground very much.”

But Alasdair Lindop, acting science lead for Ocean Wise, noted that governments control only what happens within their 200-nautical-mile economic exclusion zone. Outside of that, the open ocean is “a free-for-all.”

Without conservation groups like Ocean Wise, Seafood Watch and MSC putting pressure on those fisheries that operate in the open ocean, there’s little that governments can do, except sign international conventions that may be hard to enforce.

Deirdre Finn, program manager for Ocean Wise, said the reason for the development of so many eco-labels is consumer demand. Conscientious consumers want to know that the fish they eat was caught using sustainable and ethical methods.

“Nothing really existed about 20, 25 years ago and we’ve seen how much it’s grown and there’s a reason for that – because people are looking for it now when they’re in the grocery store or at a restaurant,” Finn said.

But what about those accusations of greenwashing?

One of the more damning criticisms of the MSC in German documentary filmmaker Wilfried Huisman’s new film, *The Dark Side of the Fish Seal MSC*, comes from a former supporter.

Daniel Pauly, a renowned fisheries scientist at the University of British Columbia and principal investigator for the organization *Sea Around Us*, tells Huisman that the MSC has “lost their soul.”

The film describes Pauly as an MSC founder. Pauly told *Business in Vancouver* he was not a founder but was closely associated with the MSC and was a strong supporter when it first formed two decades ago. He no longer is.

Pauly told BIV the MSC has lost the support of many marine conservation groups because it has certified “one abominable fishery after the other.”

“I have completely disassociated myself from the MSC,” he said. “I don’t do agitation against them. If I’m asked my opinion ... I will say my opinion, but I don’t write papers about them because, basically, I don’t consider them part of the conservation community at all.”

Asked what seafood recommendation program he thinks is trustworthy, he pointed to the Vancouver Aquarium’s *Ocean Wise*.

*Ocean Wise* is not a certification program, however, but a rating or recommendation program.

It bases its seafood rankings on the Monterey Bay Aquarium’s *Seafood Watch* program. Both analyze peer-reviewed fisheries science to grade seafood and give it rankings that allow consumers to decide whether or not to buy it.

Certification is a far more exhaustive and expensive process. The MSC uses a third-party verification system that can take 12 to 18 months. Fishing vessels can become certified without meeting all the required standards, but are expected to make improvements to maintain a

certification. Companies that become certified are subject to assessments and annual audits by independent assessors.

It also uses a chain-of-custody verification system, which includes DNA sampling, to ensure that the product carrying an MSC logo comes from a vessel that is certified. This avoids some of the misleading labelling that has been identified by groups like Oceana.

According to an August 2018 report by Oceana Canada, of 400 seafood samples tested in Canada from food retailers and restaurants in five cities, 44% were mislabelled.

In Vancouver, the study found Chilean rock crab sold as Dungeness, Asian catfish sold as cod, haddock sold as halibut and chum sold as sockeye. The report calls on the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to implement boat-to-plate verification for seafood.

That kind of chain-of-custody verification is already done by MSC, which is why it remains the most trusted seafood certification label, said Christina Burrridge, executive director of the BC Seafood Alliance, which represents the B.C. seafood industry.

“It has a comprehensive chain of custody,” Burrridge said. “If you’re any kind of a buyer, you know that what you paid for is what you’re getting, and that assurance is worth a lot of money.”

But does having MSC certification necessarily mean that the fishing fleets that caught the fish are more sustainable than smaller fisheries that aren’t certified?

In some cases, the opposite may be true. The hook-and-line tuna fishery, for example, can be said to be more sustainable than the large purse-seine tuna fisheries in Mexico that are MSC certified, simply by virtue of the gear they use.

Many smaller fisheries don’t need, can’t afford or don’t want MSC certification. That doesn’t mean they aren’t committed to sustainable fishing. Vancouver’s Skipper Otto’s Community Supported Fishery is one local example.

It uses a subscription service in which customers buy a share of the catch of small mom-and-pop “fishing families.” It doesn’t have MSC certification and doesn’t need it because it doesn’t sell to large retailers.

But because consumers like some kind of eco-certification, Skipper Otto's applied for and received a positive recommendation from Ocean Wise.

Because it's based in B.C., Ocean Wise has a better grasp of the B.C. fishing sector than other eco-labelling groups, said Skipper Otto's managing director Sonia Strobel.

But she agreed with Hilborn that there are problems with some eco-labelling programs because the concept introduces an element of social pressure that may not always be based on sound evidence.

"Maybe it's exaggerating to say this, but sometimes I think they have the power to do more harm than good, because they will sometimes greenwash, sometimes paint everything with one very large brush stroke that is inaccurate," Strobel said.

Ultimately, it should be the government's job to properly manage fisheries, she said. But until it reaches the point where all governments around the world are properly managing the world's fish stocks, she stressed there's a need for recommendation programs like Ocean Wise.

"I think that they're filling a gap right now, which has some benefits. Certainly I think Ocean Wise is playing a role that needs to be played right now, while government isn't doing its job. But I absolutely agree – fish should be the role of government."

In response to the growing proliferation of seafood certification programs, and the confusion it may be causing for consumers and retailers, a new organization called the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative was formally incorporated in 2015.

Headquartered in the Netherlands, this umbrella group developed benchmarking tools for essentially certifying the certifiers. To date, it has formally recognized seven certification programs, including the MSC and ASC.

The ASC recently certified a number of Atlantic salmon farms operated in B.C. by Marine Harvest and Cermaq. Grieg Seafood's certification is pending.

Ocean Wise continues to recommend against any farmed salmon in B.C. raised in open-net pens. Seafood Watch rates B.C. farmed salmon a good alternative.

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