

The Purrfect Answer?

United Kingdom conservationists harness cat power for sustainable seafood sourcing drive

When cats starts pussyfooting around in government seafood procurement policy, you can be sure something fishy is afoot. Earlier this year, Larry, the No. 10 Downing Street moggy belonging to the family of UK Prime Minister David Cameron, became a seafood celebrity. Apparently, Larry the cat's diet of seafood met more stringent sustainability standards than that served up to the Cabinet and staff at No 10.

restaurant chains and procurement agencies in the UK have signed up to the MSC. Why? Because sustainability is big business, and there is money to be made and markets to be secured. According to the Co-operative Bank's Ethical Consumerism 2010 Report, revenues from sales of fish labelled as sustainable rose from 70 million pounds sterling in 2007 to 128 million in 2008 and to 178 million in 2009.

"The figures are startling", says Rupert Howes, Chief Executive of MSC. "In Britain, consumers have increased their spend on sustainable seafood by 154 per cent. These findings suggest that consumers are actively looking for certified and labelled fish, and that they are remaining true to their values even in times of recession."

But is this really so? Is this a consumer-driven movement for sustainable seafood, or one pushed by corporations and environmentalists? Sales of 'ethically labelled' seafood have certainly increased, but so have supplies, both for people and their pets. Nearly 80 per cent of fisheries certified by MSC were done during the period 2008-2010, when a large number of other labels also came onto the market, including those of the retailers, many of whose claims have been challenged. One UK non-governmental organization (NGO), Client Earth, accused major food retailers of being "guilty of misleading customers by printing unfounded sustainability claims on certain fish products".

Debatable consumption

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"It is shameful that the government's standards for the public sector are weaker than those standards in Larry's pet food", carped environmental campaigners. Thanks to Larry and their campaign, the UK government has now introduced new buying standards which stipulate that 100 per cent of fish procured by the central government and its agencies will avoid endangered species and source seafood caught in a responsible way from well-managed stocks. Fish and fish products will meet standards such as Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification or be on the Marine Conservation Society's "fish to eat" list.

The UK government's road to Damascus is but the latest in a series of conversions that have taken place recently, where large retailers,

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seafood labelled as sustainable has come from active consumer search, and how much is just down to supermarket shelves overflowing with the stuff. No one associated with MSC seems to be able or willing to answer this simple question: Are consumers really selecting fish labelled as ethical, or are they just being supplied with it? Larry has done a great public relations job.

The other side of the question is why should fishermen be interested to subscribe to MSC certification given the costs? Are there any economic or other benefits in doing so? Recently, the UK's southwest mackerel handline association decided that the costs outweigh the benefits; that paying 12,000 pounds sterling plus value-added tax (VAT) was simply not worth it, especially considering the impact of the mackerel dispute further north over access to the northeast Atlantic stocks.

Jeremy Percy, the Chief Executive of the UK's (England and Wales) New Under Ten Fishermen's Association (NUTFA), recognizes "the positive contribution (of the MSC) and the clearer focus on the debate as to what constitutes a sustainable fishery, and the need for an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management, provided by the pursuit of the MSC Principles". However, an "immense cost is involved, especially for smaller groups, in obtaining an accreditation and the apparent lack of tangible commercial benefits in so doing".

"Fishery science is a detailed and specialist business", retorts MSC deputy Chief Executive, Chris Nines, "and the costs reflect that reality". Indeed, a number of European Member States are subsidizing the MSC sustainability assessments for their fishing sectors, which can ill afford the costs. Nines also points out that by spreading the costs of certification across multiple boats, the costs per vessel can be decreased rapidly. Such cost-sharing arrangements are in place in a number of fisheries, says Nines.

However, MSC claims about price premiums for fishers are harder to swallow. According to a source

associated with an MSC certifying body, depending on the fishery, a full assessment costs somewhere around 25-30,000 Euros, a pre-assessment 1,500-3,500 Euros, and annual surveillance audits the same amount. The source doubts that the majority of the fishermen see much direct economic benefit from MSC certification in terms of a better price.

In their experience of fisheries undergoing assessment, either they are under pressure from buyers or they have got someone else to pay for certification.

Paul Joy, Chairman of the Hastings Fishermen Protection Society, says that for the Hastings Dover sole gill net fishery, the MSC brings prestige rather than tangible economic benefits. "Generally, people want fish that is certified as sustainable, but they don't want to pay more for it", says Paul. "If our local authority was not prepared to bankroll us, we could not afford MSC certification. We don't make enough from the fishery to pay for the certification ourselves".

The enhanced status and the reputation that the MSC certification brings benefits not just for the fishery but for the entire Hastings community. This is why the Hastings Borough Council is happy to underwrite the costs. The Hastings Borough Council has agreed to finance the re-certification process for the Dover

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Larry, the No. 10 Downing Street cat, is now a seafood celebrity. Thanks to him, UK ministers will now eat sustainably sourced fish

Good Conscience, Bad Taste?

A gri-Food news Europe comments that, at the European Seafood Exhibition (ESE), which took place end of April and gathered representatives from 100 countries: 'The prevailing subject which outshone the key topics of previous years such as traceability, health value of seafood, or wellness, was sustainability. Sustainability labels are developing into a necessary requirement for trade with seafood.'

The publication describes the situation in Germany, the world's most important market for eco-labelled seafood: by the end of 2011, Germany's largest food retailer plans to switch its complete fish range to sustainable raw materials. During the past two years, the number of products containing sustainable raw materials doubled every year, currently accounting for 900 products on the German market.


On the other hand, the offer of low-priced eco-labeled products is soaring: 'Customer can buy matjes fillets and herring salad with a good conscience for less than a euro—prices far below the level of branded products. Consumers simply expect to buy MSC-labeled products at competitive prices', explains an

experienced purchasing manager. Many full-range retailers are upset that discount traders like Aldi and Lidl have managed to distinguish themselves with sustainable fish products—not the least due to positive reactions from groups like Greenpeace. The industry is concerned about this development, and some clearly disapprove of the trend towards low entry-level prices: 'the logo is sold at a loss' says an expert. Besides, there is also the fear that the MSC logo might forfeit its premium aura in the full-range segment. But there is more to lose: The price of MSC products is between 5 to 10 percent above that of conventional products, and the license fee (0.5% of the net turnover of labeled products) plus a small basic fee reduce the margin even further. The industry has come to the conclusion that the offer of MSC-labeled products will differentiate further. 'MSC-certified products will most likely go the same way salmon has gone before', says a sales manager. He expects a development towards 'a large volume product with different prices and qualities. Or to put it in other words: A good conscience does not necessarily mean good taste'.

sole fishery, which is now due. But a worry is that their low quotas force them to discard large quantities of valuable by-catch, and fishermen fear they may not get MSC certification this time round.

The whole certification process in Hastings cost around 70,000 pounds sterling first time round (pre-assessment, full assessment, chain-of-custody assessment and so on), with annual audit costs in tens of thousands of pounds. According to Paul Joy, "The MSC is a bit like a prestigious club, expensive to join, but with many spinoffs and intangible benefits". Paul admits that some initial positive economic benefits were generated in Holland after they obtained MSC certification. But these soon faded, because Dutch sole gill netters also obtained MSC certification, so prices came down. Like other aspects of fishing, the first entrants may profit initially, but as others enter, initial advantages are eroded.

Any price advantages are likely to get further eroded if the MSC standard is adopted as the norm by supermarkets across Europe. As the recession bites, who will be able to afford certification? Certainly not

small-scale fishermen. And when market access depends on MSC certification, what will happen to their livelihoods? Ecolabels seem to be writing their own epitaph by creating unreasonable expectations and unsustainable demands on finite resources. 

For more

www.fish2fork.com/news-index/WWF-takes-on-MS-C-over-plaice-trawl.aspx?sc_lang=en-GB

WWF takes on MSC over plaice trawl

www.goodwithmoney.co.uk/ethical-consumerism-report-2010

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Government to buy sustainable fish

www.clientearth.org/reports/environmental-claims-on-supermarket-seafood.pdf

Environmental Claims on supermarket seafood