

New hope for marine fisheries

A new initiative by Unilever and the World Wide Fund for Nature claims that market incentives will lead to sustainable fishing

The market is replacing our democratic Institutions as the key determinant in our society.

—Elizabeth Dowdeswell, Secretary-General, United Nations Environment Programme, Cambridge, Massachusetts, 27 October 1995

Two global organizations recently formed a conservation partnership to create market incentives for sustainable fishing by establishing an independent Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), the world's largest private, non-profit conservation organization, seeks a new approach to ensure more effective management of marine fisheries. Anglo-Dutch Unilever, a major buyer of frozen fish and manufacturer of the world's best-known frozen-fish products under such brands as Iglo, Birds Eye and Gorton's, is interested in long-term fish stock sustainability to ensure a future for its successful fish business.

Different motivations, but a shared objective: to ensure the long-term viability of global fish populations and the health of the marine ecosystems on which they depend.

World fisheries are in crisis. Fish have never been more popular as seafood, nor more threatened as marine wildlife. On the one hand, the world demand for fish products is steadily rising. On the other hand, scientists warn that fish populations and marine ecosystems are in serious trouble.

The FAO reports that 70 per cent of the world's commercially important marine fish stocks are fully fished, overexploited, depleted or slowly recovering. Nearly everywhere, fisheries that have sustained

coastal communities for generations have suffered catastrophic declines. In some areas, excessive fishing has driven staple species such as Atlantic cod commercially extinct. Clearly, we have exceeded the limits of the seas.

To make matters worse, modern fisheries are both heavily subsidized and enormously destructive. Worldwide, governments pay US\$54 billion per year in fisheries subsidies to an industry that catches only US\$ 70 billion worth of fish. These payments sustain massive fishing fleets that continue to 'hoover' up fish at an alarming rate. Sophisticated vessels, able to stay at sea for months, seek fisheries farther and farther afield, often in the waters of developing countries, where they compete with local fishers.

Contemporary fishing practices kill and waste an average of 27 million tonnes of fish, sea birds, sea turtles, marine mammals and other ocean life annually—fully a third of the global catch. Evidence is mounting that fisheries significantly affect the ocean environment and represent a serious threat to marine biological diversity.

Fishery managers have been unable to prevent the 'mining' of fishery resources. Governments have typically devised politically expedient 'solutions' and then described them as environmentally necessary. These efforts have mostly been too little, too late.

Short-term needs

The short-term socioeconomic needs of a region's commercial fishing industry have rendered long-term sustainability of catches a futile management goal. The Northern fishing industry, dependent on a steady income to sustain boat mortgages and marginal businesses, has steadfastly

Statement of Intent

The Problem

Fish has never been more popular, nor more threatened. Worldwide consumer demand for fish is steadily rising, but scientists warn that fish stocks are in serious decline.

In some areas, excessive fishing has driven staple species such as Atlantic cod commercially extinct. Nearly everywhere, fisheries that have sustained coastal communities for generations have suffered serious declines. Indiscriminate fishing practices kill and waste vast amounts of fish and other marine life annually.

A Global Solution

Two global organizations have committed to tackling this issue. WWF (the world's largest non-profit conservation organization) wants a new approach to ensure more effective management of marine life. Unilever PLC/NV (a major buyer of frozen fish and manufacturer of many of the world's best known frozen-fish products under such brands as Iglo, Gorton's and Birds Eyes UK) is committed to long-term fish stock sustainability to ensure a future of its successful fish business.

Different motivations, but a shared objective: to ensure the long-term viability of global fish populations and the health of the marine ecosystems on which they depend.

How Will This Partnership Work?

The end objective of the partnership between WWF and Unilever is to establish, through consultation, an independent Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) which will create market-led economic incentives for sustainable fishing.

The MSC will be an independent, non-profit non-government membership body. It will establish a broad set of principles for sustainable fishing and set standards for individual fisheries. Only fisheries meeting these standards will be eligible for certification by independent, accredited certifying firms.

Products from certified fisheries will eventually be marked with an on-pack logo. This will allow consumers to select those fish products which come from a sustainable source.

Once established, the MSC will be independent of both industry and conservation organizations, and be governed by a board of directors made up of experts from a variety of backgrounds/

The MSC will be modeled on the successful Forest Stewardship Council (FSC), launched by WWF, other conservation groups and timber traders in 1993 to promote a market-led solution towards more sustainable forestry practices around the world.

To create the MSC, WWF and the Unilever will contribute matching funds into an extensive scoping exercise to explore how the FSC model can be adapted to meet the specific sustainability needs of global marine fisheries. This study will be undertaken by a number of consultants, coordinated by an independent project manager. It will result in a draft set of founding principles for the MSC.

These draft principles will be generated by and circulated to a broad spectrum of experts in fisheries-including fishing and industry groups, conversationalists, regulators and academics. An open series of national and regional consultations and workshops around the world will then be held to refine and strengthen the principles and agree on a process for the international implementation.

WWF and Unilever are committed to supporting the process of agreeing to the principles and establishing the MSC within two years. They will actively seek the widest possible involvement from other organizations in achieving these goals.

(Signed by Dr. Robin Pellew, on behalf of WWF International and Antony Burgmans, Director, Unilever PLC/NV).

resisted change. All too often, political realities compel fishery managers ignore the implications of the best available

science. Politicians, often at the highest levels, frequently intervene in decisions about specific fisheries. Society has simply

lacked the political will to forestall the fishing industry's tendency to use up all its resources and thereby destroy itself.

To reverse the fisheries crisis, we must develop long-term solutions that are environmentally necessary and then, through economic incentives, make them politically feasible. Fortunately, an approach is available that has succeeded in other areas: Working in partnership to design and implement market-driven incentives for sustainable fishing. In order to make this work, the conservation community and progressive members of the seafood industry must forge a strategic alliance. Past experience suggests that building such partnerships and harnessing market forces in favour of conservation can be very powerful. One thing is certain. Where industry and the market lead, governments will likely follow.

In early 1996, WWF and Unilever announced their joint commitment to establish the Marine Stewardship Council within two years. The MSC will be an independent, non-profit, nongovernmental membership body. The organization will establish a broad set of principles for sustainable fishing and set standards for individual fisheries.

Only fisheries meeting will be eligible for these standards certification by independent accredited certifying firms.

Seafood companies will be encouraged to join sustainable buyers' groups and make commitments to purchase fish products only from certified sources.

Ultimately, products from MSC-certified fisheries will be marked with an on-pack logo. This will allow seafood consumers to select fish products with the confidence that they come from sustainable, well-managed sources.

A project manager will co-ordinate a team of consultants that will work on the development of the MSC. The project team will combine expertise in certification (or ecolabelling) schemes with intimate knowledge of the commercial fishing industry. Team members will consult a broad range of experts representing all stakeholders in marine fisheries.


Drafting principles

Together, the team will draft the set of broad principles for sustainable fishing that will underpin the MSC. The team will draw on the standards and guidelines embodied in existing international agreements, such as the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and the UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. The team will also enlist new information and expertise in marine conservation biology, economics, seafood marketing, and commercial viability, to help move current thinking forward.

Both organizations, WWF and Unilever, will circulate the results of the scoping exercise and draft principles to a broad spectrum of stakeholders in fisheries: conservationists, fishers, seafood industry officials, fishery managers, lawmakers, etc.

The partners will then sponsor a series of national and regional consultations and workshops around the world. The purpose of these workshops will be to refine and strengthen the principles and develop a process for international implementation. WWF and Unilever are actively seeking the widest possible involvement of other organizations in this exciting initiative. The MSC has the potential to significantly alter worldwide fishing practices in favour of more sustainable, less destructive fisheries. When Unilever and other major seafood companies make commitments to buy their fish products only from well-managed and MSC-certified fisheries, the fishing industry will be compelled to modify its current practices. Governments, laws and treaties aside, the market itself will begin to determine the means of fish production.

Unilever has pledged to source their fishery products only from sustainable, well-managed fisheries certified to MSC standards by the year 2005. As an interim step, the company recently announced that it will cease processing fish oil from European industrial fisheries by April 1997 and re-examine its use of fish oils from other sources. The massive industrial 'hoovering' of sand eels and other species for fish oil and meal accounts for over half the total North Sea fish catch and affects populations of cod, haddock and sea birds which feed on them. Sainsbury, the UK's largest retail grocery chain, quickly followed Unilever's lead and agreed to phase out the use of fish oil from European sources in 120 product lines.

We hope these initial steps will stimulate other seafood processors and retailers to join in the partnership to harness market forces and consumer power in favour of healthy, well-managed fisheries for the future. 

This article is written by Michael Sutton, Director, Endangered Seas Campaign, WWF International