Certifying the Certifiers

Ecolabelling may well be a short-term solution to maintain the status quo of industrial fisheries and international trade in high-value species

On 13 October 2008, at Bangkok, Thailand, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) opened its first conference dedicated to small-scale fisheries. Titled "Securing Sustainability in Small-scale Fisheries" (4SSF), the conference was a long time in the making. Prior to its opening, at the end of a Civil Society Preparatory Workshop, representatives of small-scale fishers from over 30 countries signed a Statement listing their concerns on a wide variety of topics, including ecolabelling. Article 22 of the Statement (see page 7) called on FAO, other United Nations agencies, regional fisheries bodies and national governments to categorically reject ecolabelling schemes.

While recognizing the value of area-specific labelling that could identify ecologically and socially responsible fisheries, small-scale fisheries representatives sent out the clear message that ecolabelling by organizations like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is just a tool for the industrial sector, and does not help small-scale fishers. Well-known for slapping ecolabels on trawl fisheries, including some that have collapsed, and a fishery for the notoriously overfished Patagonian toothfish, the MSC—a child of two multinational parents, Unilever and the World Wildlife Fund or World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF)—took a drubbing throughout the conference.

Kurt Bertelson, of the Denmark-based non-governmental organization (NGO), Living Sea, called MSC a "money machine". "Today MSC is closely connected with the privatization and capitalization of fisheries," he said, noting that MSC criteria fail to look at the energy footprints or social impacts of the fisheries it certifies. He added that the need for capital and profit in many of MSC's certified fisheries would come at a cost to resources and ecosystems. "MSC defends itself by saying its certification will solve the problems of small-scale fishers. But promises without time frames may mean that there are no small-scale fishers left to be taken care of," said Bertelson.

In general, ecolabelling was seen as a short-term solution to maintain the status quo of industrial fisheries and international trade in high-value species, which has often led to the collapse of fisheries. Ecolabelling was seen as a means by which powerful countries could continue to exploit, and profit from, fisheries in developing countries, opening markets for those who can meet ecolabelling's questionable criteria and closing those same markets to others.

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"By no flight of imagination are fisheries in most countries anywhere near the standards that are employed by MSC to assess certifiability," said Sebastian Mathew of the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers (ICSF). Noting that efforts to bring certification to small-scale fisheries in developing countries are largely "donor-driven," Mathew suggested that MSC channel its resources into

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Informal area-specific labels may better identify marine products harvested sustainably. Such labels are more appropriate for an open and equitable society

direct assistance to improve fisheries management in developing countries, rather than impose certification schemes that are seen by many as non-democratic. "Once the management regimes are in place," said Mathew, "let the fishers and their communities decide if it makes sense to go the MSC way, or, for that matter, any other way to recognize their products in the marketplace."

Article 22 of the Civil Society Statement offers the alternative of area-specific labels. Informal area-specific labels can identify products harvested under management regimes that ensure social and ecological sustainability. Such regimes can be, and have been, documented by numerous objective observers, from NGOs to the media, through transparent processes and widely accepted indicators. Informal area-specific labels benefit all participants in well-managed fisheries, particularly small-scale fisheries, without subjecting them to an arbitrary and often expensive hazing. These are the labels appropriate for an open and equitable society.

Complex schemes

Corporate-driven ecolabelling schemes move in the opposite direction. "I do not believe small-scale fisheries will benefit from a scheme like that of MSC," said Johan Williams, director general of Norway's Department of Marine Resources and Environment. "Ecolabelling schemes are most complex," he added. "They require a lot of documentation, both on stocks and the actual fishing. Obviously, this is easier to accomplish in industrial fisheries." While Williams believes market forces can be used to promote better management, he does not see any market advantage for small-scale fishers. "It is obvious that the industrial fisheries that supply bigger buyers will win any competition with smaller actors," he said.

Some markets propose to buy only certified fish, locking out potentially sustainable fishers. For those who can pay to play their game, however, such markets create 'protection' systems, similar to those used by the mafia. On a slightly less sinister level, having organizations with vested interests in promoting and issuing labels, each according to its own criteria, can lead to a confusing array of labels on questionable products. One Swedish NGO has ecolabelled farmed salmon, mass production of which is clearly unsustainable, and MSC has ecolabelled Alaska pollack, a fishery headed for trouble.

At this rate, we will soon need an organization to certify the certifiers. It would be better, as many of the participants at the Bangkok meet suggested, to establish a global economy that distributes wealth equitably and balances the interests of seafood trade and local consumption, all based on ecological and social responsibility.

For more

icsf.net/icsf2006/uploads/publications/dossier/pdf/english/issue_56/ALL.pdf
Fish Stakes

www.msc.org
Marine Stewardship Council