Making Fishing Fair

A truly sustainable vision for fisheries needs to be more holistic, protecting human rights in the form of equitable social policies and standards

The world's oceans are vast, and filled with mystery. Though many of us enjoy seafood or even an ocean view, most of us don't have a clue what happens on fishing boats, let alone under the water.

Unmistakable, though, are the changes brought by globalized industrial fisheries. Major fish stocks have collapsed around the world, fishing communities have vanished, and food insecurity has become a ubiquitous concern. Meanwhile, documentation of human trafficking, forced labour, and other abhorrent social practices along seafood supply chains is piling up. Too often, 'sustainable fisheries' initiatives ignore inequitable policies and practices that erode the social fabric of our coastal communities.

Social concerns related to inequities inherent in the MSC certification process have also been raised...

Connecting the dots between the fish on our plates and the people who catch it is no easy task. Seafood is one of the most heavily traded resources in the world, and most of it flows along a long and slippery supply chain. In the last decade or so, a 'sustainable seafood' movement has grown in many parts of the world to try to bring more transparency to this supply chain.

From wallet-card rating systems, to retail procurement policies to third-party certification, most initiatives have focused on environmental aspects of sustainability.

As FishWise has pointed out, "issues of seafood sustainability and human rights are inextricably linked, not only from an ethical standpoint, but also from a practical one." But momentum has lagged significantly all over the world when it comes to improving social and labour conditions for fishing communities along the seafood supply chain. Indeed, a recent survey conducted by FishWise reveals how little seafood companies may even know about human-rights abuses along their own supply chains.

The world's leading sustainable seafood certifier, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), notably lacks social standards. Unfortunately, this means that their iconic blue 'sustainability' check mark can be found on seafood caught or processed under labour conditions bordering on slavery. Social concerns related to inequities inherent in the MSC certification process have also been raised, along with prohibitive licensing and maintenance costs for fishermen.

International trade

Recently, standard-setting organizations from the fair-trade movement have turned their attention to seafood. Originally aimed at coffee growers, the fair-trade model seeks "to change the behaviours of producers and traders in international trade by establishing production and transaction standards such as environment-friendly production methods, minimum age for work, and fair prices paid to producers, as well as mechanisms to enforce these standards, in order to improve the lives of the producers and their communities".

*This article is by **Sadie Beaton** (Sadie.beaton@gmail.com), Sustainable Fisheries Co-ordinator, Ecology Action Centre, Canada*

Fair-trade certification may seem like a natural fit for small-scale fisheries looking for better value and recognition for their products. However, concerns have been increasing over weaknesses in fair-trade standards and certification processes. As promoting social responsibility is good for corporate bottom lines, fair-trade certifications are at risk of being co-opted. Unfortunately, the leading social and labour standards currently under development for fair-trade fisheries certification seem to be following this trend, aligning with corporate interests and failing to engage small-scale fishing communities.

Luckily, other movements and tools related to equity and social sustainability in fisheries are emerging. As demand grows for more connection to the stories behind our food, the sustainable-seafood movement is broadening. One such movement, Slow Fish, shows some promise to connect the dots around 'good, clean and fair' fisheries. Borne out of Slow Food in the mid-2000s, Slow Fish is active in over 20 countries, working in diverse ways "to promote artisanal fishing and neglected fish species and inspire reflection on the state and management of the sea's resources."

Meanwhile, the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) has been building useful guidelines for the recognition and protection of small-scale fisheries. These voluntary guidelines have been drafted with considerable participation from small-scale fishers' organizations from countries around the world, including Canada. These voluntary guidelines call for nations, markets and civil society to respect and protect the human rights of small-scale fishers while developing and implementing policies that impact fishing communities. This would involve rights associated with access to food, fish stocks and grounds, employment, fair wages and an acceptable living standard, along with the right to form and join trade unions.

The US-based Community Fisheries Network has also created elegant and simple fisheries sustainability standards. Unlike what seems to be happening within the fair-trade movement, these standards have been built with fishing communities "from the bottom up," and holistically address ecological, social equity and economic issues.

Innovative market-based tools like ThisFish are also well poised to contribute to a more inclusive sustainable seafood movement. An initiative of Ecotrust Canada, ThisFish has worked with fishing communities to develop a traceability system that can connect consumers to clear information about who, where and how a participating bit of seafood was caught, and how it travelled to your plate. Recently, the Conference Board of Canada endorsed the concept of seafood traceability as a way to increase fisheries competitiveness.

Direct marketing initiatives, including community-supported fisheries, are also growing more equitable seafood markets. In this model, based on community-supported agriculture, people sign up in advance of the fishing season for regular deliveries of sustainably harvested fish with opportunities to directly interact with local fishing families. Meanwhile, the participating fishing families are allowed greater control of their social and economic conditions, including

SADIE BEATON

Michael McGeoghegan, President Prince Edward Is. Fishermen's Association discusses seafood value chains with processor Linda Walker at EAC's Halifax workshop, 2013

setting a price for their catch that makes small-scale fishing viable.

Small-scale owner-operator fishermen are Atlantic Canada's biggest private sector employer. However, in a marketplace that increasingly rewards large industrial fisheries, these important livelihoods are at risk. Independent fishermen continue to face threats to their fisheries access as individual transferable quotas (ITQs) are pushed their way.

...a truly sustainable vision for fisheries needs to be more holistic, protecting human rights in the form of equitable social policies and standards.

Momentum is building among small-scale fishermen to work together (and with other organizations), and, in Canada, a national federation has recently been formed to defend and promote community-based fishing fleets. Protecting owner-operator fisheries from consolidation in the form of ITQs is a major concern, along with the development of new marketing and distribution initiatives. Allocation tools such as community quotas, licence banks and community-based licences are also being explored as ways to protect socially sustainable and resilient fishing communities.

Last October, the Ecology Action Centre (EAC) hosted a two-day workshop in Halifax, titled "Creating a Sustainable Value Chain for Atlantic Canada's Small-scale Fisheries". Fishermen, processors and distributors gathered with market specialists for two days to explore alternative marketing tools that recognize and reward sustainable catch methods while supporting owner-operator fishermen and their communities.

A consensus emerged from the workshop that current sustainability certification schemes do not capture the full range of values represented by small-scale, community-based fishing. Several common values that could be reflected in a regional branding or set of standards were expressed, including ensuring a fair price for fishermen, maintaining independent owner-operators, sustainable fishing practices, safe working conditions, environmental stewardship and social responsibility.

Sustainable seafood standards are an important tool, and ideally encourage fisheries to move towards low-impact, science-based management and practices. But a truly sustainable vision for fisheries needs to be more holistic, protecting human rights in the form of equitable social policies and standards. Making fishing more fair will involve not only the creation of robust standards, certifications and policy, but also better connections the people who love seafood and coastal communities with the faces and stories that make up the social fabric of our small-scale fisheries. Not to mention a whole lot of working together.

For more

www.ecologyaction.ca/
Ecology Action Centre

www.fishwise.org/
FishWise

www.msc.org/
Marine Stewardship Council

thisfish.info/
ThisFish