

The Marine Stewardship Council: New Hope for Marine Fisheries

Michael Sutton

*"The market is replacing our democratic institutions
as the key determinant in our society."*

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

To help reverse the downward trend for the world's marine fish stocks, two global organizations have formed a partnership to campaign for its more effective management. This article discusses the rationale and strategies to achieve the goals of the joint effort.



ICLARM Photo

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, nonprofit 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 one hand, 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 Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) reports that 70% 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 \$70 billion worth of fish.



Photo by MARK PREIN

Very soon, fish catch may no longer fill a basket.

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 t of fish, seabirds, sea turtles, marine mammals and other ocean life annually — fully one-third of the world catch. Evidence is mounting that fisheries significantly affect the ocean environment and represent a serious threat to marine biological diversity.

Fisheries 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.

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, depen-

dent on a steady income to sustain boat mortgages and marginal businesses, has steadfastly resisted change. All too often, political realities compel fisheries managers to 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 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 favor of conservation can



The Marine Stewardship Council gives hope to the world's fisheries.

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 MSC within two years. The MSC will be an independent, nonprofit, non-governmental membership body. The organization 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. 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 coordinate a team of consultants who will work on the development of the MSC. The project team will combine expertise in certification (or ecolabeling) schemes with intimate knowledge of the commercial fishing industry. Team members will consult with a broad range of experts representing all stakeholders in marine fisheries. Together, the team will draft the broad set of principles for sustainable fishing

that will form the underpinning of 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 Fishing and the U.N. Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks. In addition, the team will enlist new information and expertise in the fields of marine conservation biology, economics, seafood marketing, and commercial viability to help move current thinking forward.

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, fisheries 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 Marine Stewardship Council has the potential to significantly alter worldwide fishing practices in favor of more sustainable, less destructive fisheries. When Unilever and other major seafood companies make commit-

ments 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 fisheries 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 reexamine 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 more than half of the total North Sea fish catch and affects populations of cod, haddock, and seabirds which feed on them. Sainsbury's, the largest retail grocery chain in the United Kingdom, 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 favor of healthy, well-managed fisheries for the future.

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Erratum

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In the article entitled *Inland Community Fisheries in Southern Laos* by Ian G. Baird

p. 15, third column - The following paragraph should be inserted.

Although long-term monitoring is required, there have already been some significant signs that the villagers' management plans are beginning to pay off. For example, with regard to the highly valued and threatened fish species, *Boesemania microlepis*, or "pa kouang", which reaches up to 60 kg in weight, the effect of creating a number of deep pool conservation zones in Khong District has been positive.

before the 2nd paragraph which reads "Villagers from Ban Tholathi reported in mid-1995:..."