



# SEAFOOD MARKETING AND CERTIFICATION

POLICY BRIEF NO. 3 APRIL 2020

## OVERVIEW

- With consumers increasingly choosing sustainable or local seafood, independent certification schemes will continue to have an important role for facilitating consumer choice.
- A lack of data available for some UK fish stocks and the limitations in access to certification schemes pose challenges for certifiers and UK fisheries, alike.
- Locally focused schemes and a review of the criteria used to determine sustainability may give smaller-scale operators better access to certification.
- Sustainable certification improves transparency for the seafood industry and could lead to an increased interest in local, UK seafood.
- Consistent messaging across certifiers about what 'sustainable seafood' is will help consumers to make informed choices.
- Sustainable seafood needs to be clearly marked as such, so consumers can easily choose sustainable produce at supermarkets, fishmongers and restaurants.

## BACKGROUND

An average person in the UK eats 1.15 portions of seafood each week (1). Increased interest in seafood beyond the 'big five' seafood species (cod, tuna, haddock, salmon, and prawns) (2) presents an opportunity for UK fisheries and aquaculture to expand markets for other species.

### Sustainable seafood

Sustainable seafood is often considered to be seafood from well-managed fish stocks (or

aquaculture farms), where both the environmental impacts of fishing (or farming) and the longevity of the fish population are considered (3). Sustainably certified seafood has been harvested in accordance with a set of criteria determined by the specific certifier – often measuring traceability, method of catch (or production), status of fish stock and other environmental impacts. The mark of certification – sometimes referred to as an 'ecolabel' – is often the only way most consumers know the provenance of the seafood they are buying.

This briefing summarises the output from the APPG on Fisheries open Parliamentary seminar held on 16 July 2019. The meeting brought together stakeholders from across the sector and across the UK. Seafood educators and environmental NGOs, industry and retail representatives, and certification experts met to discuss the range of seafood certification schemes available, how they might work together and how to overcome barriers to a sustainable industry. This document is a synthesis of the discussions that took place both at the event and online (via #FishBrands).

There is a global movement towards an awareness of our environmental impacts. Eating sustainable seafood is often cited as a way to make a more responsible choice for the environment – a recent study shows that 70% of seafood consumers in the UK, think sustainability is important (4). When choosing seafood for sustainability reasons, consumers rely on marketing and certification schemes to guide their choices at supermarkets, fishmongers and restaurants.

Independent, internationally recognised certification schemes like the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) have successfully created a ‘brand’ that consumers know to look for when buying their seafood. Up to one third of seafood sold in the UK in 2018-19 was MSC certified (5), indicating the efficacy of the programme. According to MSC data, fishers are applying in growing numbers each year to have their sustainable fishing efforts recognised as sustainably certified. Fishers can benefit from certification, as consumers are often willing to pay the premium price for sustainably sourced products (6).

### Consumer preferences

Demand for alternative species (beyond the ‘big five’) is steadily growing. This is in tandem with increasing demand for seafood that is certified as sustainable or caught following best practice. Sustainable or locally sourced seafood is becoming increasingly important for UK consumers (5,7,8). How seafood is certified and marketed can therefore play a large role in the success of certain seafood species in retail outlets and eateries.

Independent certifiers have successfully created brands that consumers recognise and this has led to increased sales of these products. In turn, it appears that fishers are increasingly seeking to have their sustainable fishing practices certified (9).

Through the sustainable certification and marketing of seafood, consumer preference has the potential to drive positive environmental changes for an industry.

### CHALLENGES

Given the range of seafood species in the UK, it can be complex for all sustainable seafood to be sufficiently recognised through certification schemes. There are two key challenges for the future of sustainability certification: how to measure sustainability when there is a distinct lack of data for some UK fisheries, and the access to certification schemes for different fisheries.

#### Data deficiency

One of the biggest barriers to being able to certify a stock as sustainable is the lack of published, high quality, scientific data to enable accurate assessments. In the UK, data deficiency is one of the main reasons that much of the seafood caught is not judged to be sustainable, as it makes compiling sustainable seafood guides difficult. This can create the false impression that very small-scale fishers are fishing unsustainably, when they simply fish in a data deficient fishery.





## Access to certification schemes

While sustainable certification is sought after by many fishers who want recognition for their efforts to fish sustainably, certification schemes are unavailable to some fisheries. This is often also because certain certification schemes are prohibitively expensive for some smaller-scale operators. Like the absence of data, this can create the false impression that very small-scale operators are fishing unsustainably, when the lack of certification may be a consequence of the lack of economic access to certification.

## WAYS FORWARD

While a government certification scheme could improve access to certification for some producers, it would likely generate an inappropriate market advantage for sustainable seafood products. Instead, a matrix of independent certification approaches with clear and consistent messaging could harmonise the schemes consumers rely on, while enabling seafood businesses and operators of different scales to be certified.

### Local approaches

There is room for a range of seafood certification approaches across the sector, including some suited to encompass smaller-scale operators. Local certification schemes like the Cornwall Good Seafood Guide (CGSG) are able to give nuanced advice to consumers about the provenance and sustainability of local species. There is also an

opportunity for local people to be involved in the decision-making for regional guides, contributing to their uptake.

Other certification schemes are targeted at helping businesses provide more sustainable seafood. For example, the Sustainable Fish Cities project recommends that engaged business networks serve fish species that are certified or recommended by a range of different independent certifiers.

### Consistent messaging and marketing

A clear and consistent message about what it means for seafood to be 'sustainable', would enable the full spectrum of retailers, businesses and consumers to have all the information they need when considering sustainable seafood. A strong communication campaign from a united UK seafood industry could deliver this message, while reiterating the breadth of schemes that certify UK seafood as sustainable.

However, sustainable seafood also needs to be clearly marketed and advertised so when consumers want to choose sustainable produce, they know what to look for. While there may not be a role for government in certifying products, a 'sustainable labelling protocol' could be a worthwhile contribution to this issue.

### Transparency and the origin of seafood

While not all consumers choose their seafood based on sustainability (nutritional value and cost

are other key considerations), those who do want to be sure they have all necessary information to make an informed choice. Certification of seafood improves transparency of the industry because consumers can ascertain the impact of how their seafood is produced, and also where it comes from.

Transparency, through certification that provides information about seafood provenance, could help promote local or UK seafood. UK consumers eat predominately imported seafood, but often equate 'local' with 'sustainable' seafood (7). There is an opportunity for fishers, certifiers – and their marketing teams – to recognise the benefits of transparency to not only provide consumers with enough information to make choices, but to also drive increased interest towards sustainable UK seafood.

### Criteria for 'sustainable' certification

How each certifier determines whether seafood is sustainable depends on their own criteria for sustainability. While this can pose some challenges when weighting different criteria in a certification scheme, it also presents an opportunity for different measures of sustainability to be included.

There is an opportunity for some certifiers to expand which sustainability criteria should be considered. For example, a certification scheme that considers the carbon footprint (e.g. from fuel usage, impact on ocean carbon sequestration, transport) of a fishery or supply chain may work to highlight the sustainability of particular vessels in a climate change context.

The All Party Parliamentary Group on Fisheries is supported by The Fishmongers' Company, with the Secretariat provided by Mindfully Wired Communications.

## SUMMARY

Given the financial barrier to certification for some producers, fishers need to be properly informed about the range of certification opportunities available to them. In tandem, there is a need to demonstrate consistency across certification schemes, to ensure the consumer is adequately informed. This will involve detailed discussions about what exactly sustainability entails, and what factors should be included or excluded.

In addition to efforts from certifying bodies, an effective marketing campaign and clear packaging of sustainable seafood in supermarkets, fishmongers and restaurants would help consumers make informed choices.

Certification can help encourage consumers towards sustainable and local seafood products. The global movement towards sustainable choices will continue to encourage the fisheries industry to seek out certification that will reward their sustainable practices and return a higher price for their products at market.

## REFERENCES

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