

Greenpeace position on certification of seafood

The world's fisheries – unsustainable, unfair and destructive

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The world's oceans are being destroyed at a rampant pace. Ecosystems once thought to be resilient and inexhaustible are collapsing. Worldwide 90 % of stocks of large predatory fish disappeared since the 1950s, including high value species such as tuna, swordfish, cod and halibut¹. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) estimates that about 80% of commercially valuable fish stocks are fully exploited, over exploited, depleted or recovering from depletion².

As well as having direct effects on the populations and numbers of target species, commercial fisheries are having unprecedented effects on the larger marine ecosystem. The removal of top predators is causing massive shifts in the entire ecosystem as they are replaced by others that occupy a lower niche in the food chain. Additionally, destructive and wasteful fishing practices like bottom trawling are impacting the ecosystem, by physically destroying diverse and fragile marine habitats. Driftnets and long-lines also tend to waste life due to high bycatch of unwanted species such as marine mammals, birds, sharks and turtles. Current fishing practices are also threatening the livelihoods and food security of millions of people especially in the coastal communities of the developing world as fishing fleets of the wealthy global north are moving to fish in the coastal waters of developing states. Access to their waters is often granted by unfair fisheries access agreements, which can conflict with the needs of the local coastal fishing communities as their resources decline. The cash return to coastal states can be as low as 4% of the value of the catch.

The negative impacts of overfishing, coupled by unfair fisheries agreements, are exacerbated even further by illegal, unregulated and unreported (IUU) fishing. Every day, in every ocean, pirate fishers are catching fish outside of legally set quotas in a lucrative industry that is worth an estimated US\$ 9.5bn (total value of IUU catch per year)³.

It is now widely recognised by the scientific community that marine reserves – areas where extractive practices like fishing and mining are prohibited – are an essential tool for the management of marine resources, including fisheries. Just like national parks on land, marine reserves safeguard essential habitats and environments needed to maintain marine biodiversity and ecological functions and services. Where marine reserves have been established, the benefits to the fishing industry have often been significant in terms of increased catch levels outside of the reserves, as well as in terms of more secure catches over a longer time period, providing the industry with time to invest in more sustainable and economic practices.

Scientific data suggests that 30–70% of the surface area of our oceans should be marine reserves. At the moment less than 1% of the world's oceans are protected in such fully protected marine reserves.

In addition to establishing a network of marine reserves, a fundamental management shift incorporating precaution and an ecosystem-based approach as core principles is urgently needed to ensure sustainable use of our ocean resources.

Fishery Certification Schemes – are they adequate markers of sustainability?

Several fishery certification schemes have been developed over the past decade, all claiming that the fish that they certify have been sustainably caught or farmed and that they are the best option for consumers to purchase.

Greenpeace is of the opinion that no fully credible certification system for sustainable seafood currently exists. So far, the above-listed challenges facing our oceans are far from being tackled and the fundamental principles of precaution and ecosystem approach are not yet incorporated into fisheries management.

At present, a seafood label can at best help to identify the best available choice from a particular fishery. Such labels are no adequate indicators of whether the overall fishery is sustainable, nor do they guarantee that the products have been legally caught. They are certainly not indicators of whether the purchase of such products is the best choice in seafood in absolute terms.

Since there is currently no comprehensive and fully reliable certification scheme that can deliver on sustainability, or indeed provide the volumes required by most retailers, it is ultimately up to each individual retailer to ensure that only seafood from sustainable fisheries or farms is being sold.

Together with scientists, Greenpeace has developed criteria for identifying the worst fishery and aquaculture practices. Fisheries that target overfished or depleted stocks, or stocks that are being depleted rapidly, and those using methods that are highly destructive to other marine organisms and/or habitats are graded 'red'. Aquaculture practices that source unsustainable fish feeds and/or have a negative impact on the surrounding environment are also graded 'red'. The criteria are based on current performance standards of a fishery/farm in the context of the relevant ecosystem.

Key fisheries and farms supplying each of the most commercially important species nationally are assessed. Where the majority of these fisheries or farms are red-graded, the species are then placed on national Greenpeace 'Red List' of seafood species. An international list has also been produced. Regardless of whether a seafood product has been certified by seafood certification schemes, if the species appears on any of the Greenpeace Red Lists, or on similar lists from other organisations, retailers should not stock them unless they can prove that they are from a fishery or farm that is not red-graded. Greenpeace encourages retailers and suppliers to use the criteria to assess the status of any of the seafood they are intending to buy.

In simple terms, Greenpeace defines seafood as sustainable if it comes from a fishery with practices that can be maintained indefinitely without reducing the target species' ability to maintain its population. Additionally, the fishery must not adversely impact on other species within the ecosystem by removing their food source, accidentally killing them, or damaging their physical environment.

¹ Myers RA, Worm B (2003). Rapid worldwide depletion of predatory fish communities. *Nature* 423: 280–3.

² FAO (2008). *The state of world fisheries and aquaculture (SOFIA)*. Biennial report. Rome, Italy: Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations. p30

³ MRAG (2005). Review of Impacts of Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated Fishing on Developing Countries. Synthesis report. Marine Resources Assessment Group Ltd(MRAG), London, UK.