

Engaging People

Plenty more fish in the sea?

The sad state of the world's fisheries is an indictment. This article will not repeat the details of this unfolding 'tragedy of the commons' (see below if you want to know the grim facts). Instead, Penny Walker looks at the efforts made by the Marine Stewardship Council to engage people when grappling with this slippery, many-tentacled problem.

Why is it such a slippery problem?

Tragedy of the commons – a single skipper or retailer could decide to catch and sell fewer fish, or switch species. They'd lose income – and there's no guarantee that the fish are safe from others. So the long-term benefit is uncertain.

Wide open space, uncertain numbers – getting agreement on the numbers is hard: oceans are big, fish don't stay still. This makes it harder to persuade the short-term losers that it's in their long-term interests. It also makes it easy to blame other people – 'foreign' and 'pirate' fleets.

Horse trading in the fish-markets – inter-government negotiations to protect fisheries, setting and policing quotas, don't have a good track record.

Cold, scaly and wet – campaigners struggle to make fish and their habitats as appealing as mammals, birds and terrestrial landscapes.

Too little, too late – this is about system collapse, not gradual decline. The hard evidence comes after the damage is done.

Even as the problems reach the point of no return, there still aren't good enough reasons for most stakeholders – who can only see part of the picture – to change their ways. Something needed to happen to make it worthwhile changing to a more sustainable path.

Marine Stewardship Council

Enter Captain Birdseye (owned by Unilever) and WWF. The multi-national NGO wants to conserve fish stocks because of their inherent ecological value.



Unilever, one of the world's biggest buyers of fish, wants to conserve fish stocks because their long-term business success depends on selling fish. In 1997, they jointly set up the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), with the aim of reversing

Ecological devastation: 70-80 per cent of the world's fish stocks are fully exploited, over-exploited, depleted or in a state of fragile recovery (FAO 2005)

Eating to excess: we eat fish which are in serious trouble: cod, monkfish, plaice, tuna.

It's about people too: one billion people in Asia and one out of five Africans depend on ocean fish for their entire supply of protein.

the decline in global fish stocks through market pressure: specifically, setting up a voluntary eco-label for fish.

This would give consumers a simple, trustworthy way of distinguishing 'good' from 'bad'. In turn, this provides an incentive to manage fisheries in a sustainable way.

Why do this jointly? Neither had been successful enough acting in its traditional way. Both could see that by working together they would have more credibility. Fishermen who wouldn't listen to flaky tree-huggers would listen to hard-nosed Bird's Eye buyers. Ethical consumers, other campaigners and sceptical media would believe WWF when they might be suspicious of the multi-national company's motives. And by acting together, with the express intent of letting the MSC become independent within a few years,

they could bring together a wide range of essential stakeholders, to forge the consensus needed to make a success of this voluntary scheme.

The first couple of years were spent working with around 300 stakeholders to develop the standard for sustainable fisheries management. Rupert Howes, CEO of the MSC, says that this was vital – “The credibility and acceptance of the standard depends on the fact that it has been developed by a multi-national, multi-stakeholder group.”

The MSC’s formal structures exist to ensure that conservation and business interests can feel comfortable with its standards, processes and rulings. The MSC has a board of trustees, a technical advisory board and a stakeholder council, drawn from its various constituencies. Howes says, “These formal channels ensure that while not everyone may agree with the outcome, everyone can see that the process is fair.”

Certifying fisheries

The process of certifying fisheries is carried out by independent bodies, which are accredited by the MSC. The certification process includes input from stakeholders at various stages, as well as from independent scientific advisors. As Howes says, “Anyone at all can get involved in the fishery-level assessment.”

Meetings with stakeholders at this fishery-level can be quite challenging. As well as a high level of emotion – because of the threats that may be perceived by the fishing community – there may be practical things to manage, like the need

to explain complex science to people with little formal education and in some cases who cannot read. The MSC’s Technical Advisory Board has recently issued guidance on how to involve stakeholders, and the assessment methodology for certifying bodies also sets out why and how to involve people.

Engaging with stakeholders is an ongoing investment (see Table 1) and it’s still a bit of a leap of faith, which is why having stakeholders involved from all sides is so important – it’s easier to make that leap, if you know that other people also have an interest in making it succeed.

There are some sustainability problems which are so deeply rooted in the mess of the status quo, that individual organisations or sectors just cannot solve them on their own. It’s like that with fish.

The MSC needs to show tangible success without excessive lead-times for fisheries, to encourage them to apply for certification – over forty fisheries are in the programme. There needs to be sufficient supply of labelled fish that big buyers can feel confident in pledging to switch to it - these fisheries represent about five per cent of total wild edible capture, or 3.5 million tonnes of seafood.

Table 1

Stakeholder	Why are they important?	Need to be confident that:
Fishermen/fisheries	Direct impact on fisheries. Choose whether to apply for certification.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Label will give differentiation and other market benefits. Certification process will not be overly long and complex.
Retailers, business-to-business	Filter consumers’ choices.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consumers understand the label. NGOs won’t criticise.
Consumers	Choose to buy or not.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fish is ‘greener’. They won’t sacrifice value or quality.
Green NGOs	Credibility with consumers and media.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Fisheries are truly sustainable

And its standards need to be high enough to satisfy green NGOs. At the moment, this win-win has not been fully achieved.

Howes says, “The MSC has certified fourteen fisheries, and three of them are quite controversial with some environmental NGOs. There’s a standing invitation to Greenpeace to join the Stakeholder Council, but they haven’t felt able to do so.”

Blake Lee-Harwood from Greenpeace explains why: “The MSC has certified some fisheries which we don’t like, making it hard for us to support the label as a whole. But we are in dialogue. We have felt that our voice may be stronger and better heard from outside. It’s not clear how the Stakeholder Council influences the MSC Board and its decisions, and it’s still not functioning brilliantly. We would like to see it being a huge success. It’s not there yet.”

A virtuous cycle

Making a success of initiatives like the MSC involves creating and maintaining a virtuous cycle of interdependencies - the more stakeholders trust that the MSC and its eco-label are delivering benefits, the more likely it is able to do so. And the key to this trust is good stakeholder engagement. Howes says, “There are huge expectations on us, and we are a small, young organisation. But we are putting lots of investment into ongoing relationships with our stakeholders. It’s the only way we can meet the massive global challenge.”

Penny Walker

Penny Walker is an independent consultant and facilitator. Penny.walker@btclick.com

Further information

*Marine Stewardship Council, www.msc.org
Greenpeace, www.greenpeace.org.uk/oceans/ouroceans/index.cfm*

*Unilever, www.unilever.com/ourvalues/environmentandsociety/sustainability/fish
The End of the Line: How Over-Fishing is Changing the World and What We Eat, Charles Clover, Ebury Press, 2004
Like Shooting Fish in a Barrel, Sustain www.sustainweb.org/publications/downloads/shooting_fish.pdf*