Scientists slam fuel subsidies for fishing fleet

Study from University of British Columbia researchers questions the value of sustainable seafood labelling

GLEN KORSTROM

The University of British Columbia researchers have debunked sacro-
sanct sustainable seafood eco-labelling programs. In recent articles pub-
lished in respected academic journals, fish scientists Jennifer Jacquet and Dan-
el Pauly lambaste the programs as being ineffective, misguided and inherently tilted in favor of large commerc-
ial fishing operations and against those that oper-
ate in boats 10 meters or less.

They argue that small fishing operations are gener-
ally more sustainable because they're more likely to select-
vocally catch fish and don't use destructive fishing methods like seabed trawling.

They also don't have the research budgets of their larger counterparts. Those budgets enable larger oper-
ators to pay fees to qualify for sustainable seafood cer-
tification.

The duo's "Funding pri-
orities: Big Barriers to Small Scale Fisheries," appears in the August edition of Con-
servation Biology.

Rising environmental-
consciousness in main-
stream society has helped spawn numerous sustaina-
ble seafood eco-labelling programs during the past decade.

They include:
• the Vancouver Aquarium's Ocean Wise program;
• the David Suzuki Foun-
dation-supported SeaChoice program; and
• the Marine Stewardship
Council's certification pro-
gram.

These programs have flourished because some get funding from larger char-
itable foundations and be-
cause consumers perceive them as worthy initiatives.

But Jacquet and Pauly say sustainable fishing ad-
voates should not rely on wallet cards that identify which fish are allegedly be-
ing caught sustainably.

The duo says those adva-
cates should instead focus their criticism on the fuel subsidies that most fishing nations give to their fishing indus-
tries.

Activists are lobbying for state governments, which are World Trade Organization mem-
bers, to agree to end fishing industry fuel subsidi-
ies. The WTO will be a forum for those negotiations.

Jacquet said those subsidi-
aries disproportionately help larger fishing operations be-
cause they use more fuel.

She pointed to research from fellow UBC researcher Rashid Sumaila, which shows that the Canadian government provided $18 million in fuel subsidies to fishermen in 2000, the last year for which Sumaila has data. The subsidies come when fishermen file their taxes.

"Small-scale fisheries in the developed world, in the tropics, are being hedged out of the marketplace by well-intentioned eco-label-
ing and wallet cards, be-
cause they can't compete in the global market," Jacquet said. "They're very data-poor, so they can't be included in eco-labeled programs."

But sustainable fishing programs representatives dispute Jacquet and Pauly's claims.

"It's misinformation that the larger fisheries are necess-
arily less sustainable than the smaller fisheries," said Seattle-based Kerry Cough-
lin, who is the director of communications, Americas, for the global Marine Stew-

ardship Council.

Coughlin confirmed that fishermens must pay fees to get MSC sustainability cer-

"There are so many permuta-
tions of scale. It's not 'big versus small.'"

-Bill Wareham, senior marine conservation specialist, David Suzuki Foundation

Wareham said his foun-
dation does its own research and doesn't charge any fees. Its wallet cards, which are downloadable at www.

senchoice.com, list seafood species and regions and divid-

e them into three catego-
ries: best choice, some con-
cerns and avoid.

Vancouver Aquarium Ocean Wise program as-
sistant Kelly Johnson said her program gets much of its research from the Mon-
terey Bay Aquarium's Sea-
food Watch program.

She said her program helps consumers identify sustainable seafood by allow-
ing local restaurants to put the Ocean Wise logo on menus next to seafood that the program deems to be sustainable. n

gorstrom@latimes.com

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