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Ecoholic

Good fish, Bad fish

you wanna chow down on sustainable -Swimmers, but how much can you trust the eco labels?

By Adria Vasil

You're at a fish counter, waiting for a thunderclap of clarity as you eye the shimmering cuts of pink and white flesh behind the cold plexiglass. You mutter to yourself, "Is wild salmon the good one? Is Atlantic cod the bad one?"

Depending on who you ask, anywhere from 40 to 60 per cent of consumers would, all things considered, like to make an environmentally sound choice, and as of now virtually every major Canadian grocery chain is listening.

Yes siree, grocers are jumping away from bad press into a pool of sustainable seafood policies like a jittery school of flying fish. As the impact of those historic purchasing policies starts to show up on shelves, onlookers are crossing their fingers, hoping we can buy our way to healthier seas. But not everyone agrees we're on the right boat to catch truly sustainable fish.

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Somewhere between distributing a million little red-, yellow- and green-listed seafood guides, putting the squeeze on chefs to ditch endangered fish and flunking every national grocery chain for their reckless seafood choices, fishery activists have managed to get retailers to sit up and notice.

Now, two years after Greenpeace picketers started swarming storefronts one chain at a time, Metro just announced it would be blacklisting seven species of fish. The week before, Whole Foods Canada proclaimed it would ditch all red-listed fish by Earth Day 2013.

All this dovetails with Walmart Canada's and Loblaws'(the largest buyer and seller of seafood in Canada) commitments to sell nothing but 100 per cent certified sustainable seafood by lucky 2013.

Since 63 per cent of the seafood that Canadians eat is purchased at grocery stores and retail outlets (compared to 50 per cent in the U.S.), Sarah King, co-author of the Greenpeace's Taking Stock report card, says these policies will have a major impact.

"They have the power to push the producers and push for change on the water, which is harder for consumers to do."

What kind of change are we talking about? The first step starts with trying to figure out what exactly retailers are putting on shelves, which until now has been about as clear as a marsh in spring.

If you're lucky, the label may say Pacific cod, but it won't tell you precisely where in the big blue sea it was caught (Hecate Strait, BC, or Gulf of Alaska?), how it was caught (destructively trawled or better, bottom long-lined?) or even what damn country it's from.

Says King, "A lot of retailers are now taking steps to be transparent and improve traceability from ship to shelf. They're undertaking rigorous investigations and having discussions with suppliers, trying to figure out where it's from, is it legal, what is it."

Indeed, several chains have agreed to at least tell us the fish's proper name (a big commitment since studies reveal nearly a quarter of fish is mislabelled) and where it was caught, but few have yet agreed to cough up details on what gear was used to catch it.

And that's key for any consumer trying to determine whether a fish falls on the green side of a seafood pocket guide or lurks in red avoid-at-all-cost territory. Metro is the first of the big nationals to say it will publicly divulge as much on labels.

Still, most agree the onus has been left on consumers long enough. If we're going to see real market change, grocers have to go beyond transparency and traceability and overhaul what they're actually ordering from the high seas.

That's something most of the chains have committed to do to some degree, and in deciding which seafood actually qualifies as sustainable, many are turning to certified sources. This is when the seas get a bit choppy.

Market leaders like Loblaws and to a lesser extent Walmart Canada have in fact committed to shift all their wild caught fish over to sources certified by one org, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The MSC is widely considered the best and only independent, globally recognized standard. It was co-founded by the WWF and Unilever, one of the world's largest seafood purchasers, back in 1995 as both grew alarmed at dwindling fish stocks, the lore goes.

Since it became independent in 99, it's managed to certify a surprising 7 per cent of global wild seafood stocks (12 per cent if you fold in those fisheries mid-certification).

Everything was hunky-dory when it first started certifying small fisheries, but things grew a little trickier as it put its stamp on industrial fisheries large enough to supply the world's largest food companies.

Then MSC-certified New Zealand hoki populations collapsed. And later, enviros were taken off guard when, in the middle of the Take A Pass On Chilean Sea Bass boycott, some Chilean sea bass (aka Antarctic toothfish) gained MSC certification.

Monterey Bay Aquarium and 30 other orgs spoke out against the approval on Antarctic krill. Most recently, the David Suzuki Foundation and others were highly critical as erratic BC sockeye salmon won the MSC label earlier this year.

Then the dissing went public in a big way. Last month, six fisheries scientists published a scathing opinion piece in the journal Nature condemning the certifier. Too many fisheries were being certified despite population declines, they wrote, and small fisheries were being bypassed. They also pointed out that formal objections by NGOs were discouraged because groups might have to pay as much as £15,000 (dropped to £5,000 this August) to MSC to fund audits into their complaint.

Ultimately the article argued that "the incentives of the market have led the MSC certification scheme away from its original goal, toward promoting the certification of ever-larger capital-intensive operations."

Says Jennifer Jacquet, lead author on the piece and a scientist with the UBC Fisheries Centre's Sea Around Us Project, "What I have a problem with is that we're telling consumers this is the best you can do, this is most environmentally sustainable choice. We're not telling them, 'Hey, this is the best of a bad bunch,' which is what the MSC really is."

Adds Jacquet, "That really disempowers consumers to do much more, especially since they paid more for this fish. It's a cop-out."

But not all critics of the MSC agree the label should be dismissed. Bill Wareham at the David Suzuki Foundation says of the MSC system, "It's not perfect, but it's quite good, and our organization doesn't have a problem with most of the certifications. Out of 100 certifications, there've been maybe half a dozen objections. Maybe there should be none, but that's probably not realistic."

Okay, so those half dozen objections represent at least a third of fish certified by MSC, but Wareham argues that environmentalists are better off working with the MSC to reform it from the inside. He says the battle is vital, "but if we got rid of the MSC, we'd spend five years trying to recreate something just like it."

For its part, the MSC says that it's brought about improvements in every controversial fishery it's waded into. The sockeye salmon fishery was given 43 different conditions for improvement, the South Georgia toothfish, aka Chilean

sea bass, fishery that got the label had to change gear to eliminate seabird bycatch and put observers on every ship to ensure no illegal fish were caught.

The MSC promises a report on the net benefits to all its fisheries over the last 10 years and says reforms based on NGO complaints are in the works.

Says Kerry Coughlin, MSC's regional director for the Americas, "If we were to set the bar at 100 per cent, we'd be back to not having any impact at all. Then we make no change or improvement."

Regardless, some chains have decided to make up their own mind. Whole Foods went rogue and decided earlier this year not to offer MSC krill products. Ditto for MSC-certified hoki at the UK's Waitrose chain.

And insiders say Loblaws has quietly acknowledged that stores may not sell an MSC product if it doesn't meet their criteria.

Nonetheless, there's no denying MSC is still broadly supported by retailers and many enviro groups.

An informal poll of fish gurus like Paul Greenberg, author of Four Fish, and Taras Grescoe, author of Bottomfeeder, reveals that, despite misgivings, they're still on board with the label, whether it's on a Filet-O-Fish sandwich (McDonald's does use MSC-certified fish but doesn't advertise it) or in a grocery's freezer.

Says Grescoe, "I face the same problem as other consumers. I continue to eat fish, and there's still very little information available. So when there's an MSC label, I say to myself that's good, some work has been done on this species." But he's careful to add, "I don't take what they say as gospel."

Grescoe's signature advice is to stick to species low on the totem pole, like sardines and farmed mussels, instead of chowing down on the 10 per cent remaining large fish still left in the sea.

Greenberg says the next step has to be figuring out some palpable way of protest that goes beyond choosing fish on menus or in grocery stores, perhaps harassing politicians for more protected marine reserves, tougher fish quotas and smarter aquaculture standards.

WWF's Bettina Saier has faith that both can happen at once. "Over the last few years, the marketplace has put a lot of pressure on our department of fisheries and oceans to implement policies that are required by standards [like MSC]." (Some provinces are even paying to have fisheries certified by MSC to stay in the game, though the Department of Fisheries maintains that the MSC certifications only prove how sustainable Canuck fisheries already were.)

Industry, Saier says, has taken responsibility for this resource on both the business and the policy side, "and that's what leads to transformational change."

That's the theory, of course, and we're in the middle of seeing if it plays out. As DSF's Wareham notes, "It's still a question mark whether it's going to work."

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