



Porcupine!

Newsletter of the Department of Ecology & Biodiversity, The University of Hong Kong

Who's responsible for responsible fishing?

In most cases, the answer is 'government' but, in reality, we all are. Any of us who eat fish, catch fish, cook fish, culture fish, buy and sell fish, keep fish in aquaria, or study fish, are responsible and can help by the choices we make, the policies we support, what we teach and tell our friends and family. The task of managing open access resources, like marine fisheries, is enormously challenging and there is a growing appreciation that the actions and choices of the wider public also have an important, probably essential, role to play in filling the gaps that governments struggle with.

In 1995, the FAO (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations) adopted the current Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries which sets out 'principles and international standards of behaviour for responsible practices with a view to ensuring the effective conservation, management and development of living aquatic resources, with due respect for the ecosystem and biodiversity' (<http://www.fao.org/fi/agreem/codecond/codecon.asp>). The Code is a set of guidelines for managing and developing fisheries, and, although voluntary, calls for countries to sign a Compliance Agreement. The Code not only covers the biological and ecosystem aspects of resources but also encompasses the interests of consumers and other resource users.

How can those of us at different stages in the consumer chain, whether seafood comes into our homes or forms part of our livelihoods or hobbies, make a difference? Since the FAO Code of Conduct was developed, other initiatives have emerged, typically through NGOs, whereby traders and consumers can pledge to buy fish that have been taken sustainably. Two examples that illustrate this approach are the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) for food fish, and the Marine Aquarium Council (MAC) for aquarium fish.

The MSC was formed in 1997, based on the FAO Code, as an independent, non-profit, organisation with a mission to identify well-managed fisheries and to promote consumer preference for seafood products bearing the MSC label of approval for demonstrably responsible fisheries. The hope is that well-informed consumers will contribute to conservation by expressing, through their purchases, concern about overfishing and poor mariculture practices. Several fisheries have been certified and others will follow (www.msc.org). Consumer awareness cards are also being developed in many areas to help us to make better seafood choices (e.g., www.mbayaq.org/ct/cr_seafoodwatch/sfw_resources.asp#ssi).

The MAC is also a not-for-profit organization that brings marine aquarium animal collectors, exporters, importers, and retailers together with aquarium keepers, public aquaria, conservation organizations and government agencies. Buyers of animals for aquaria will be able to make choices based on a system of core standards and certification applied to those engaged in the trade. The core standards address ecosystem and fishery management, collection, fishing and holding, and handling, husbandry and transport. As for the MSC, participation in the scheme is voluntary, with the hope that consumers will eventually reward those businesses that comply with the standards (www.mac.org).

The key to success for these systems is for traders, consumers, etc., to keep themselves informed and to exercise their considerable power in the market place by selecting more sustainable options. Consumer awareness is growing in Hong Kong: if we want to, we will soon be able to make responsible choices that could have profound effects on fishing and trade practices.

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