



The central role of NGOs in sustainable fisheries

The growing influence of non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in the seafood industry means that they now play a central role in setting standards for sustainable fisheries. In a new study, researchers used the Dutch *Good Fish Guide* to illustrate how NGOs can efficiently engage consumers, industry, fishermen and government.

In the seafood industry, NGOs aim to influence policy by informing consumers about sustainability issues, often through awareness campaigns, boycotts, certification schemes and product guides. These are market-based tools that bypass the conventional political process in favour of directly influencing behaviours and the market.

However, there is little evidence that NGO market-based tools directly influence which species are caught – a form of ‘vertical pressure’. Using the Dutch *Viswijzer* (*Good Fish Guide*) as a case study, the researchers explain how ‘horizontal pressure’ exerted by NGOs could be more important. This refers to improving the level of communication and social interaction between different stakeholders, particularly NGOs and fishermen in this case, who may have conflicting priorities.

The *Viswijzer* was set up in 2004 by the North Sea Foundation (NSF) to independently assess stocks of the most popular commercial fish species. In the new study, the researchers explore the growth and development of the *Viswijzer* from 2004-2009 using 10 interviews with fishermen, three NGOs, the Dutch Fish Product Board and the fisheries management authorities within the Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality. They also analysed related Dutch Parliamentary documents and articles in local and national newspapers.

The primary consumer tool produced by the *Viswijzer* is a small wallet-sized card, which indicates the sustainability status of different species with a traffic light system (red = overexploited, green = environmentally sustainable). The card is now reportedly used by 25% of all Dutch consumers.

As the momentum of the *Viswijzer* increased, negotiations and cooperation between the NSF, other NGOs (Greenpeace and WWF), industry representatives for fishermen and fish traders, scientists and the government improved dramatically. On advice from the *Viswijzer*, two large supermarket chains removed the threatened North Sea cod, plaice and sole from their shelves. At the time, this triggered a negative response from fishermen as it opposed their fishing practices and portrayed them as ‘destroyers of the ecosystem’.

This led to parliamentary debates about the transparency of the assessment criteria and as a result, a social covenant was signed in 2008. This meant that the government took responsibility for overseeing sustainable production, disseminating information and independently auditing the *Viswijzer* assessment criteria.

This is the basis upon which the government, fishermen, others in the fishing supply chain and NGOs have continued to communicate in the Netherlands. It is now common for the fishing industry to consult NGOs over new fishing techniques and ways to improve their sustainability status.

The researchers conclude that the key to success for the *Viswijzer* has been in encouraging trust and cooperation through which fishermen and NGOs can communicate on an equal footing. They recommend that NGO-led market based initiatives are vital in creating ‘new spaces of interaction’ to stimulate ongoing two-way communication (vertical and horizontal) between stakeholders and for attracting the attention of policymakers.

1. See: www.goedevis.nl (in Dutch)

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