Fisheries Ecolabelling:

Opportunities for developing countries

The usual response to the growing concern at the state of the world's fisheries resources has been to implement more command and control measures to regulate fishing activity. These types of measures embody disincentives aimed at preventing overfishing and ecosystem damage. While fishery regulatory instruments have a very important place in ensuring the sustainable extraction of fisheries resources, the continuing decline in the state of fisheries suggests a need to compliment these measures with more innovative mechanisms, of which one is ecolabelling.

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The last few years have witnessed a growing awareness and an interest by the public to identify a platform from which to drive a more responsible approach to fishing. Many initiatives have been developed to utilize this elevated interest to reduce the impact of fishing on the environment. Examples include: consumer boycotts of certain species; development of sustainable seafood lists; and most significantly in recent times, a rise in the demand for more specific information about the environmental attributes of seafood, accompanied by a move to support sustainable fisheries through purchase decisions. One mechanism that has been used effectively to harness consumer interest as a viable conservation tool is ecolabelling.

Standards and labels for sustainable fishing

A number of environmental labelling programmes have been developed for both aquaculture and wild capture fisheries. Most labels that address environmental issues for aquaculture products have been based around requirements for organic production, and generally focus on the quality of the end product. However there are aspects of organic production that have direct relevance to environmental issues including water quality, pollutants, nutrient cycling and feed origin.

Organisations like the International Federation of Organic Agriculture Movements (IFOAM) have developed organic standards against which production systems can be assessed. There are some aquaculture certification programmes that are not organic and which are instead based on standards set specifically to address environmental issues. An example is the Accreditation Certification Council (ACC).

The earliest instance of ecolabels being applied to seafood products is the Dolphin-Safe label. The Dolphin-Safe label is a single-issue (dealing with a single environmental issue) label that was instituted in response to concerns about the number of dolphins that were being killed during purse seining for tuna in the East Pacific ocean. The Dolphin-Safe standard requires that dolphins should not be intentionally set upon during fishing trips. Although

What is ecolabelling?

Ecolabels or environmental labels have been defined as a «seal of approval given to products that are deemed to have fewer impacts on the environment than functionally similar products». The use of ecolabelling as a tool in environmental management is a fairly recent development. The first ecolabel made its appearance only a little over twenty years ago. Its potential value as an important mechanism in the efforts towards sustainable utilisation of resources has, however, been recognised internationally. Ecolabelling programmes are based on standards developed around the concerns of consumers. The development of a standard normally involves input from a wide range of stakeholders associated with the production and use of the product. Labelling is often preceded by some form of assessment and certification that the product does indeed meet the criteria or standard set by the promoters of the label.

Ecolabelling programmes are categorised into three types based on the level of separation of the promoter of the label from the production, supply and distribution of the product in question:

- 1st party labelling – involving self-declaration from industry
- 2nd party labelling – involving industry endorsement
- 3rd party labelling– which entails assessment by a 3rd party, independent certifier.

The credibility of an ecolabelling programme is associated with the process through which the standard was developed and the institutional procedures behind the programme. Third party ecolabelling schemes offer the highest level of independence and are therefore considered more credible than the first two types.

there are concerns about by-catch issues associated with dolphin-safe tuna, a significant part of the decrease in dolphin mortality in the last ten years has been attributed to the public uptake of the Dolphin-Safe label.

Another ecolabelling programme, in use, is the Marine Aquarium Council (MAC) – an ecolabelling programme for aquarium fish. The programme has a standard, which looks at fishery and ecosystem management and the collection, handling, husbandry and transport of aquarium fish. Aquarium fish production operations can be assessed against the MAC standard. Aquarium fish produced from operations that have been successfully assessed against the MAC standard can be sold with the MAC ecolabel. The aim of the MAC programme is to use its standard and certification programme to conserve coral reefs and other marine ecosystem habitats of aquarium fish that are at risk because of destructive harvesting practices.

The Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations (FAO) have recently begun a process of developing guidelines for institutional and procedural aspects of ecolabelling for fish and fishery products and guidelines for minimum substantive requirements (standard) for ecolabelling. The FAO's work in this area is a further demonstration of how ecolabelling is set to be integrated into mainstream policy to tackle global fishery issues.

The most widely known ecolabelling programme for food fisheries is the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The MSC's programme is modelled on a third party, independent approach to ecolabelling. It is applicable to all types of fisheries and in keeping with current developments in fisheries, embraces the extension of the focus of fisheries management from target stock to an ecosystem approach.

Photos: Oloruntuyi

How the MSC works

The MSC programme works by identifying and providing an environmental label for seafood products that come from well-managed fisheries. Fisheries can be assessed on a voluntary basis against the MSC Standard (Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing). If the assessment is positive, products from such fisheries can be marketed with the MSC label. The MSC label is recognised around the world as identifying the best environmental choice in seafood.

The MSC eco-label provides consumers with a choice to support such fisheries through their purchasing decisions and offers several benefits to fishers, fisheries managers, industry, consumers and retailers who support sustainable fishing. Benefits include improvement in fisheries management, the potential for premium price for fishery products, access to new markets, widespread public support, loyalty of customers to suppliers and the possibility of attracting investment to the fishery.

The MSC's environmental standard is based on the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and was developed through an international consultation that spanned a period of two years. It consists of three principles, which are elaborated by a number of criteria:

1. The state of the stock,
2. Impact of the fishery on the ecosystem,
3. Performance of fishery management system.

The MSC has three main functions: standard setting, accreditation, and logo licensing. The institutional structures and procedures behind the MSC were developed based on norms existing within recognised international institutions such as the International Standards Organisation (ISO), International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling Alliance (ISEAL) and Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

Since the MSC programme was established in 1997, ten fisheries have become certified to the MSC Standard. The total volume from fisheries engaged in the programme, inclusive of those currently being assessed has reached an estimated 4.02 percent of world marine capture fisheries and there are currently over 200 products with the MSC label available in 19 countries.

The benefits for fisheries certified to the MSC standard include price increases, new and more stable markets, product development, higher share prices and lowering of price volatility.

Benefits of ecolabelling

The primary role of ecolabelling is to improve environmental performance. The drive for ecolabelling is however maintained by the economic benefits, which derive from preferential consumer purchase for environmentally friendly products. Economic benefits encourage fishers to harvest fish in a more responsible manner.

Specific benefits for fisheries certified to the MSC standard have varied with different fisheries but generally the benefits have included price increases, new and more stable markets, product development, higher share prices, lowering of price volatility, and opportunities for pub-

Developing country participation in ecolabelling grows slowly. In 2004 the South African hake fishery and the Mexican Baja California lobster fishery became certified to the MSC standard.

lic demonstration of commitment to conservation (Fishing News International; Marine Resource Economics Vol. 18).

Surveillance audits show that certification has led to improvements in fisheries performance. Each fishery certified to the MSC standard to date has been certified with conditions for continued certification. There is an incentive for fisheries to improve, as corrective measures must be implemented in order to prevent a loss of certification. Annual and ad-hoc surveillance audits by third party certification bodies, have shown that certified fisheries have implemented required improvements and that these are expected to lead to further demonstrable improvements in the health of the fisheries over the long term.

Ecolabelling and developing country fisheries

In the developing world the threat to fisheries resources is of particular concern. The developing world is home to more than 90 percent of the world's fishers and fish is very important to food security, providing in many coastal communities the most significant source of animal protein. In addition an increasing amount of fish consumed in the developed world is imported from developing countries and provides much needed foreign earnings for these countries.

Amidst concerns that consumption patterns in the West are a contributing factor to resource depletion in developing countries, ecolabelling can provide an assurance to retailers that their businesses are sourcing from developing country fisheries that are well managed and not in danger of overfishing or damage to the ecosystem. In addition, ecolabelling provides an opportunity for developing countries to access international markets and benefit from premium prices without compromising the capacity of the fishery to continue to be productive in the future. One other key benefit of certification includes the potential for the certification process to help improve stakeholder participation in fisheries management. Furthermore since the MSC standard takes the ecosystem impacts into consideration, the programme is an incentive to encourage an ecosystem approach in the management of fisheries in developing countries.

Developing country participation in ecolabelling has progressed at a more measured pace compared to fisheries in the developed world. Recent developments however indicate trends for higher levels of participation in future. In 2004 two developing country fisheries – the South African hake fishery and Baja California (Mexico) lobster fishery – became certified to the MSC standard. A fishery in South America – the Chilean hake fishery – is currently going through full assessment and there are several other developing country fisheries, including small-scale fisheries, at various other early stages of certification.

Developing country participation in fisheries ecolabelling has grown in the face of initial concerns surrounding the general concept of ecolabelling. Some of the concerns specific to fisheries ecolabelling have revolved around the feasibility of applying a universal standard to all types of fisheries, the cost of certification, data availability issues and trade implications. These are concerns which can be addressed, and the potential for ecolabelling to impact on market access is reduced and even removed when programmes are based on an institutional framework, that allows equitable participation from different types of stakeholders from around the world.

The MSC was designed to be a voluntary, international programme, accessible to all types of fisheries regardless of size, scale, type, location or intensity of fishery. To facilitate this, the MSC's procedures were developed based on international guidelines for standard setting, accreditation and certification. Measures in place to take these considerations on board include a governance structure that involves a broad regional stakeholder base, increased outreach, funding programmes, efforts to develop certification infrastructure in the developing world and an evaluation process requiring assessment to be appropriate to the size, scale, nature and intensity of the fishery.

Ecolabelling is a useful tool that provides an avenue for the market, which puts the pressure on fisheries resources to become a tool to protect the resource. There has been significant progress towards its use, not only in developed countries but also in developing countries. Expectations are that this trend will continue. Concerted efforts are required to progress the current momentum and ensure that anticipated gains are realised. The development of strong multi-stakeholder partnerships between developing and developed country stakeholders will remain crucial in advancing opportunities for fisheries in developing country to engage in and benefit from the use of ecolabelling as a policy tool for sustainable fisheries.

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