



# OCEAN TRUST

*SUSTAINING THE OCEANS & COMMUNITIES DEPENDENT ON THE SEA*

## **Sustainability psychosis – are we losing touch with reality?**

I was stopped in the aisle of the International Boston Seafood Show last month by a supporter who told me one of his customers received a complaint about serving an endangered species. “What species?” I asked. “Atlantic cod,” he responded.

A few aisles down I ran into representatives from Mexico who asked, “What do you think about this ‘buy legal Mexican shrimp’ initiative?”

“Good advice regardless of the origin,” I replied.

“But the information they published about our fishery is not correct, what should we do?” asked the officials from Mexico.

At the same show a visitor to the Ocean Trust booth asked, “How are we supposed to know what to believe with so many sustainability programs?”

The questions are not new, but seem to be more frequent and cover a wider range of species each year, and the request for species profiles from Ocean Trust members responding to consumer questions keeps growing. I’m beginning to wonder whether we’ve lost touch with reality or if we are just lost in a sea of sustainability advice.

When I returned to my office from the show, I sent an Atlantic cod profile to the member I saw in Boston to pass along to his customer. The simple answer to that question is that Atlantic cod is not one stock. There are at least 18 major stocks, many with distinct subpopulations that have wide geographic distribution across the North Atlantic, and they’re all separately managed.

New England cod is separated into the Georges Banks and Gulf of Maine stocks, neither of which are endangered but are strictly managed and are rebuilding. Gulf of Maine cod is no longer overfished. Landings were up 3 percent in 2009, reaching 19.7 million pounds with a value of \$25.2 million.

That’s good news. So why shouldn’t we eat cod and support the fishermen and families who made the real sacrifices to achieve these results? Rebuilding stocks through management is the key to sustainability, not campaigns that confuse consumers.

Then I looked at the Mexican shrimp initiative. I already knew some of the claims about the country’s wild shrimp fishery were not true, as Ocean Trust had just completed an independent review on the recertification of TEDs (turtle excluder devices) in 2010.

Like my colleagues who work in Mexico, I was surprised to see a group promoting a “buy legal Mexican shrimp” initiative, and waited for the next shoe to drop, an offer to provide their traceability or sustainability program as the answer.

Recommending that companies buy legal fish is good practice regardless of the source, as there are illegal fisheries everywhere. We have our own share in the United States.

In 2008, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Office of Law Enforcement (OLE) investigated more than 4,800 incidents of illegal fishing. While the majority of cases complied with conservation measures, some people do attempt to skirt the law. A visit to the OLE website illustrates how "perfect" U.S. fisheries are ([www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ole/newsreleases.html](http://www.nmfs.noaa.gov/ole/newsreleases.html)).

Singling out Mexico was unwarranted, especially as they just completed a thorough re-evaluation by NOAA and the State Department. Their conclusion: Mexico's program should serve as a model for Latin American fleets.

The 2010 U.S. re-assessment of the Mexican wild shrimp fisheries not only confirmed compliance with U.S. laws and requirements, but also showed that Mexico has measures in place that exceed enforcement systems in the United States to assure legal production of wild shrimp.

Unlike the United States, Mexico has an impressive satellite Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) program that tracks 100 percent of the Mexican fishing fleet operations and locations 24/7, allowing the government remote capability to monitor closed areas and seasons, and identify individual vessels and their movement.

As we debate catch shares in the United States, Mexico has developed and pilot-tested a catch-share program in the inshore shrimp fishery. BRDs (bycatch reduction devices) have been required in protected areas in the upper Gulf of California for several years and are now required on all trawlers operating in Mexican waters.

The overall status of the Mexican shrimp fishery is stable (~60,000 metric tons landed per year). As with any fishery there are challenges, including overexploited regions ("old" coastal lagoons, uncontrolled fishing) and like the U.S. shrimp fishery, bycatch, but Mexico has an active gear research program to address bycatch conducted with both industry and environmental foundation support.

In 2010, Mexico released test results on new trawl nets that show potential to reduce bycatch by allowing bottom fish to escape through a dual footrope system, wider net mesh sizes and BRDs placed near the cod end. The net also incorporates new hydrodynamic steel doors with higher fuel efficiency, lower carbon footprint and less impact on the bottom.

The bottom line is Mexico has enhanced its enforcement and compliance with U.S. TED requirements, and its fisheries are strictly regulated with advancements and management tools not found in U.S. shrimp fisheries.

As convenient as it is to follow the advice of non-governmental organization campaigns or seafood buying cards, it can be over-simplistic, losing distinctions among stock groups like Atlantic cod and over-stated like advice to buy legal Mexican shrimp.

Perhaps more troubling is the lack of scientific reasoning, peer review and social responsibility that goes into formal fishery assessments and marine resource management.

Last year, Ocean Trust sponsored a workshop on science and sustainability to encourage direct dialog between fishery research scientists and the seafood industry, and to provide guidance and clarification on sustainability and status of stocks around the world.

One of the main recommendations from our workshop was to support competent science and management authorities, and provide a voice for what has been a silent science community in the public debate about sustainability.

As one of our science participants, Brian Rothschild UMD/SMASST (UMass Dartmouth/School for Marine Science and Technology) pointed out, “There has been a decoupling between sustainability proxies and scientific reasoning, but there is a significant opportunity to slow down (the) rhetoric and increase the focus on fundamental management-related, scientific missions.”

As companies consider the maze of sustainability programs, here are some basic strategies to keep in mind: Trust competent science authorities and fishery management systems, work with trusted suppliers and know where your product comes from, and support fisheries that follow management regulations and make the real sacrifices to ensure sustainability.

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