

Introduction to 'Celebration of Sustainable Seafood Day' 27.02.08 by Chris Leftwich, Chief Inspector Fishmongers' Company.

Welcome to Billingsgate market and in particular to our Seafood Training School. This is our first venture into sustainability and the school's deputy director Adam Whittle has put together a different sort of programme for you today, but one that I hope you all enjoy. We have a team of extremely interesting speakers who throughout the day will each champion a particular species of seafood. They will put before you their own arguments as to the sustainability of the species they are championing. Once you have heard all the speakers will invite them all out to the front for an open panel forum. This will enable you to ask questions in order to clarify any issues regarding sustainability. I would stress that this is an opportunity for questions and not for audience members to make statements. At the end of the forum you the audience, having listened to all the evidence, will be required to vote on the species that you consider the most sustainable. There is a voting sheet at the back of your packs that I will ask you to complete and hand in to one of the staff. The votes will then be counted and an award will be made to that species considered by the audience to be their favourite.

But before we get in to the main part of the programme I guess we have to ask the question as to what do we understand by the term sustainability. Personally, I would suggest that it means different things to different people. The general public's definition of sustainability is likely to be very different from that of a fisherman, which is also likely to be very different from a fish buyer, which is different again from someone looking at certifying a fishery, which is probably different again from that of an environmentalist. I would also question as to whether this is a modern term or is it something that has always been around and we have just put a new badge on it.

After all if we go back to the 18th century there was an eminent priest that went by the name Malthus. He was extremely concerned about sustainability, in this case it was sustainability of the human race. He was concerned that the population was growing too fast and that there was not a sufficient growth rate in food production to be able sustain the growth of the population. His solution at the time was quite novel in that he suggested controlling the growth of the population by restricting birth rates, especially among the poor. Fortunately, for us, it was not necessary to introduce the Draconian solutions to the problems perceived by Malthus as many of us would not be in this room today. Food production techniques improved dramatically and as far as the West is concerned there was and has been plenty of food to go round. But now technology has improved to the point where as far as Seafood is concerned there are very real concerns, not on this occasion for the human race but for the products coming from our seas. The days when the skipper of a trawler relied on his own instincts are long since gone. Even the smallest boats have modern equipment on board, such as sonar and radar, which means that as far as the fish are concerned there is no escape. We all hear on a regular basis that three quarters of our seas are either over exploited or fully exploited and that if nothing is done there could be no fish left in the sea. According to a recent report this could be by as early as 2048. This is the

scare-mongers worst case scenario, but it has hit a cord with many people, which has brought issues of sustainability to the fore and it has now become a real issue. Anyone involved in the seafood industry ignores it at their peril.

So what do we actually mean by the term sustainability! Are we talking about sustainability of a particular stock or stocks of fish in which we have a particular commercial interest to the exclusion of others in which we do not. If we exploit a particular species, albeit in a manner that is considered sustainable or responsible are we considering how even at this level of exploitation it affects other species in the eco system. Is this a criteria that we should consider before passing judgement. It could also be that with climate change and moving stocks that we need to take an even broader look at the situation and consider it in global terms as species migrate from one area to another.

There is no real definition in the dictionary of sustainability that would adequately explain what we in the industry would consider to be the correct definition. The nearest we can get is the universally accepted definition of sustainable development. This definition came out with the publication of the Brundlandt commission report in 1987 and suggested that sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. I think this is a fair definition and I would suggest that in order to have sustainable development in the fish industry, in the longer term we must in the first instance have sustainable fisheries. But in conforming to this definition we need to consider that sustainable development and sustainable fisheries take into account the impact on the environment and tries to minimise environmental damage. So are we then talking about sustainable fisheries or responsible fisheries.

The 1995 FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries states that the right to fish carries with it the obligation to do so in a responsible manner so as to ensure effective conservation and the management of the living aquatic resource. It also goes on to say that the best scientific advice available must be taken into account in order to evaluate the current state of the fisheries resource and the possible impact of the proposed measures on the resource.

Let us consider for a minute how some of the different groups might view sustainability.

The Public.

The vast majority of the public probably know very little about sustainability. They will have heard of the problems regarding fish stocks on the various news media, but often this information is not necessarily based on the best scientific advice available or the information is slanted in a particular way to suit a pre-formed argument. They will also have heard a lot of bad news stories about farmed product. In fact quite a lot of the information put out in the media can be easily discredited. But bad news sells newspapers whereas good news seldom does. There are a whole plethora of conservation organisations, some good some bad, each producing their own definitive lists

of what constitutes a sustainable fish. But these lists are not consistent and some are not very scientifically based. This means that the public are often getting confused and mixed messages. They are not sure what is the right message, and which one to believe. It is of course highly likely that many do not really care and their first thoughts on the subject are how to sustain themselves on a limited income, and the choice between making a decision on a product probably comes down to how much they can afford. There are of course a small percentage of the population that are very well informed and know a lot about the subject. This group can make informed decisions about what they purchase and from whom. But for the majority they will rely on the integrity of the premises from which they are purchasing. This of course places a huge burden of responsibility on the buyers for these various organisations to make decisions on behalf of the general public and to provide the correct information at the point of sale.

The Fisherman

He is likely to have a different view to most because he has to make his living from the sea. As with most hunters they find it difficult to restrain themselves when there appears to be plenty of fish in the sea at a given moment in time, and it certainly goes against every logic to throw back product once it has landed on their deck for fear of prosecution. Although they will all appreciate the declining stock situation when they haul their nets and there is not enough in the catch to pay the bills. With a mortgage on his boat, limited days at sea and quotas he is going to look very closely at the economics of sustainability. Surely, if he can be persuaded to alter his fishing methods to fish in a more environmentally friendly and sustainable manner and at the same time maximise his profits it is likely he will do so. But he will not do so in isolation, if at the same time all those around him still continue to fish in the wasteful way in which they have always done, he may not remain so convinced if his catch continues to decline. It is up to the buyers to reward the responsible fishermen by paying a premium for their product as this will not only convince the individual but could possibly exert pressure on the group to change. Schemes such as the Seafish responsible fishing scheme will only be effective if those that are responsible are rewarded sufficiently.

The Buyers

This group has probably got the hardest job of all. They are sandwiched between meeting the needs of their customers whilst at the same time sourcing product at a reasonable price in order to maximise the profits for their organisations. But there is also more and more pressure to ensure that their decisions take in to account fair trade and environmental and ethical issues, and as I have said many members of the public rely on them to make the decisions on their behalf.

The NGO's

Most NGO's are concerned with both sustainability and the wider sustainability of the ecosystem. Many of the large retailers these days will consult with the NGO's on what to sell. But this brings with it a responsibility to provide the correct information based on sound scientific advice. There are

times when one thinks that some NGO's are being deliberately contentious to bring attention and publicity to their own organisation rather than providing the correct information to the public and dealing with real facts. Unfortunately irresponsible reporting does little to persuade the industry to change, but what it does do is to add fuel to the confusion that already exists within the minds of the public. The most well known NGO in the fisheries sector is of course the MSC, which was originally set up by Unilever and the WWF. Many fisheries are currently either certified by them or are in the process of undergoing certification. But just because a fishery is not certified by the MSC or another body does not necessarily mean that it is not sustainable. Many small-scale fisheries cannot afford certification and some Countries that have well managed fisheries do not want to go down the certification route at the moment.

The Scientists

The scientists will use biological reference points to determine the status of a particular stock. But in order to make accurate assessments they do require accurate data. As we are all aware, in the EU, the management system is based on TAC's which given the current discard system cannot be said to accurate. The scientists can only give a best guess estimate as to how much is thrown away compared to how much is landed and this has led to many stock failures. Given the evidence I would think that most of us would agree that the current EU fishery policy has difficulty in providing fisheries that are sustainable or responsible because they are not based on sound scientific information. But even within the EU there are exceptions and examples of good fisheries and we will hear evidence about some of those later today. However, in many other areas of the world the fisheries are well managed and there is close co-operation between the fishermen and the scientists. This enable the scientists tp make accurate assessments, which help to create and maintain sustainable, well managed fisheries.

In conclusion, I would say it is not my job today to influence the outcome of todays vote but merely to attempt to get you thinking about some of the factors involved in sustainability. It is up to the individual presenters now to convince you with their arguments as to whether or not you believe that their particular commodity is sustainable. It is of course possible that all will provide convincing arguments. In that case it is up to you to decide who has been the most convincing and thus deserving of the award. I hope you enjoy the rest of the day with us and please feel free to provide any feedback you might have to Adam.