

Seafood certification - who's really on first?

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“Sustainability certification” has become a watchword of people in the so-called marine conservation community in recent years. However, their interest seems to transcend the determination of the actual sustainability of the methods employed to harvest particular species of finfish and shellfish and to use the certification process and the certifiers to advance either their own particular agendas or perhaps the agendas of those foundations that support them financially.

It doesn't take an awful lot of sophisticated insight to recognize that a “sustainable” fishery is one that has been in operation in the past, is in operation presently, and will be in operation in the future. That's what sustainability is all about – for lobsters, for fluke, for surfclams, for guavas, for hemp, for alpacas, in fact for anything that can be grown and/or harvested.

(Of course “marine conservationists” would have us believe that a fishery that has a noticeable impact on the marine environment isn't really sustainable. Imagine, if you can, a farm that has no environmental impact; in essence producing crops without interfering with the natural flora and fauna that “belong” there. That would get beef, cotton, soybeans, corn, mohair and what have you off the tables or out of the closets of perhaps 6 billion of the people who we share the world with, but if you are a committed marine conservationist, so what? The marine conservation community, and the foundations that support it, has been frighteningly successful in convincing people that “sustainable fishing” is actually “no impact fishing,” but as we learned quite a few years ago, even hook and line fishermen catching one fish at a time can have a far from negligible environmental impact.)

Several recent events have increased the focus on sustainability and its use – or misuse – in attempts at influencing the buying habits of the seafood consumers.

In the first of these, Walmart (the world's largest retailer) now requires its fresh and frozen fish/seafood suppliers to “*become third-party certified as sustainable using Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) or equivalent standards. By June 2012, all uncertified fisheries and aquaculture suppliers must be actively working toward certification.*”

In the second, the National Park Service in the US Department of the Interior announced that all of its culinary operations “*where seafood options are offered, provide only those that are ‘Best Choices’ or ‘Good Alternatives’ on the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch list, certified sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council, or identified by an equivalent program that has been approved by the NPS.*” Senator Lisa Murkowski questioned Park Service Director Jonathan Jarvis about this “recommendation” (the term he used) at an Energy and Natural Resources Committee. She asked whether NOAA (the National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration) was involved in formulating this recommendation. He responded that he didn't know. Senator Murkowski responded “*NOAA is the agency*

that makes the determination in terms of what's sustainable (as far as fisheries are concerned) within this country”

When considered in a vacuum these are both interesting comments on the importance that is being put on “sustainability” by fish/seafood providers, and is indicative of a positive trend by consumers who are increasingly demanding that the products they buy are produced in an environmentally acceptable manner.

And the fact that a federal agency, the National Park Service, would demand – or as Director Jarvis waffled – would recommend that its vendors provide only seafood certified sustainable by two non-governmental organizations while ignoring the *de facto* certification that is implicit in federally managed fisheries is not likely to surprise anyone with any familiarity with the morass that the federal bureaucracy has become.

However, neither Walmart nor the US Department of the Interior exists or operates in a vacuum, and it seems as if there is a bit more at work here than is obvious.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is the largest international organization – headquartered in London – providing fish and seafood sustainability certification. It was started in 1996 as a joint effort of the World Wildlife Fund, a transnational ENGO, and Unilever a transnational provider of consumer goods.

The chart below lists recent grants to the MSC by the Walton Family Foundation and the David and Lucille Packard Foundation in recent years.

Grants to MSC from Walton Family Foundation

2007	\$1,640,000
2007	\$820,000
2008	\$1,675,000
2009	\$1,700,000
2009	\$1,700,000
2010	\$4,622,500
2011	\$3,122,500
2012	\$1,250,000
Total	\$16,530,000

<http://www.waltonfamilyfoundation.org/about/2009-grants>

Grants to MSC from David and Lucille Packard Foundation

2005	\$1,750,000
2006	\$1,500,000
2006	\$100,000
2006	\$87,900
2007	\$1,500,000
2008	\$1,506,000
2008	\$250,000
2009	\$4,050,000
2010	\$125,000
2011	\$1,900,000
2012	\$250,000
2012	\$550,000
2013	\$250,000
Total	\$13,818,900

<http://www.packard.org/grants/grants-database/>

The Monterey Bay Aquarium was established with an initial grant of \$55 million from David and Lucille Packard. Their daughter Julie is Vice Chairman of the Packard Foundation. She is also Executive Director and Vice Chair of the Monterey Bay Aquarium's Board of Trustees.

The MSC also lists the Resources Legacy Foundation as one of its supporters. The Resources Legacy Foundation has received \$99 million from the Packard Foundation. One of its programs is the Sustainable Fisheries Fund, which along with its other activities provides funding *"reducing the financial hurdles confronting fishing interests that wish to adopt sustainable practices and potentially benefit from certification under MSC standards."*

According to CampaignMoney.com Ms. Packard donated \$75,000 to the 2012 Obama Victory Fund.

In both of these initiatives NOAA/NMFS, the organization that provides virtually all of the data and other information that sustainability determinations are based on, that is required by federal law to stop unsustainable fishing in federal waters, and that performs its own sustainability analyses on those fisheries has been completely left out of the picture.

All things being equal, this could just be passed off as business – and government ineptitude - as usual. However, when tens of millions of dollars in donations by mega-foundations with “marine conservation” agendas that are looked at skeptically by so many in the fishing industry are thrown into the mix, should this be considered as just more business as usual or does it warrant a much closer look?