

Sustainability is simple



By David Frulla and Shaun Gehan

Stories of top local chefs bemoaning the difficulties of identifying and then implementing a sustainable seafood policy are far too prevalent. The latest, a *Boston Globe* article very typical of the genre, quotes one New England restaurateur: “The whole thing about sustainability is that the more I learn, the more confused I get.” An answer exists. It’s as simple as going down to the wharf.

Melissa Kogut, executive director of the national Chefs Collaborative, promotes a sustainability-based approach and offers the following definition: “Sustainable seafood is wild caught or farmed with consideration for the long-term viability of the species, affected ecosystems, and fishing communities.” Ms. Kogut’s ideal just happens to be a pretty good summary of the Magnuson-Stevens Act’s requirements. (We also would include domestic aquaculture products. Our domestic industry is highly regulated by the states, EPA, Food and Drug Administration, and in some cases, NMFS.)

Consider what a “Sourced from the USA” label means under the Magnuson-Stevens Act. The fishery supplying the product is not subject to overfishing, and if overfished, is on a fast track to rebuilding. The fish were harvested by means that consider and protect essential fish habitat and minimize bycatch. The protection and restoration of endangered species and marine mammals are mandatory. Strict food safety rules apply, from the net to the plate. As a bonus, the law at least creates the aspirational goal of maintaining vibrant traditional fishing communities. The USA label guarantees a product any restaurant should be proud to serve.

It is beyond our reckoning why this obvious solution is not part of the discussion. Part of the answer may be that nobody ever seems to turn to the experts at NMFS, the councils, or science centers for guidance. NMFS’ excellent *FishWatch* website remains an underused resource. NMFS hasn’t helped matters, however. While the president has assigned the Commerce Department the job of promoting exports and thus domestic job growth, we can’t recall NMFS ever promoting its website until this March at the International Boston Seafood Show.

Meanwhile, environmental groups and their funded researchers have energetically filled the void. Journalist Paul Greenberg’s *Four Fish* offers this attitude: “Brand any fish ‘sustainable,’ and

you risk making it so popular that it is fished to the point of depletion.” Not with Magnuson-Stevens Act catch limits in place, you don’t.

Or else, Google “sustainable seafood.” Our first page of hits consists mostly of links to a variety of “guides,” including Monterey Bay Aquarium’s (in)famous Seafood Watch list and others by Greenpeace, Environmental Defense Fund, and Natural Resources Defense Council. This plethora of color-coded charts represents the idiosyncratic views of each organization, whose sustainability definition is colored at least somewhat by the niche each has carved out in the green marketplace. No wonder chefs are confused.

Domestic sources can’t fully sustain our nation’s voracious appetite for fish and seafood, especially given the evermore recognized and publicized benefits of omega-3s. But giving domestic seafood its deserved stamp of sustainability and securing its rightful place on restaurant plates — particularly plates set on high-end, white tablecloths — is long overdue. That step also recognizes the sacrifices American fishermen have endured to put all stocks on a sustainable path. Small business fishermen selling to small business chefs. What’s confusing about that?

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