



< Is Sustainable-Labeled Seafood Really Sustainable?

February 11, 2013 12:00 PM

Copyright ©2013 NPR. For personal, noncommercial use only. See Terms of Use. For other uses, prior permission required.

MELISSA BLOCK, HOST:

This is ALL THINGS CONSIDERED from NPR News. I'm Melissa Block.

ROBERT SIEGEL, HOST:

And I'm Robert Siegel.

In this part of the program, we're going to hear about seafood, specifically about the two words that are changing the way many of us buy our seafood: Certified Sustainable.

BLOCK: The movement to sell seafood that can be fished without doing harm to the species or the environment is no longer limited to high-end grocery stores. Wal-Mart, Kroger's, even McDonald's are getting into the act, selling wild caught seafood with those magic words: Certified Sustainable.

SIEGEL: The Marine Stewardship Council gives its seal of approval to fisheries that they say help protect the oceans. The MSC is also a prime example of an important trend: private groups, not the government, telling consumers what's good or bad for the environment.

BLOCK: Many environmentalists say the MSC is a good idea. But as NPR's Daniel Zwerdling reports, even some of its supporters warn you don't always get what you pay for.

DANIEL ZWERDLING, BYLINE: Come with me for a moment to a supermarket and you'll see why this program for sustainable

seafood is so compelling. You'll also learn that shopping for so-called sustainable seafood is trickier than you might like.

I'm meeting an executive from Whole Foods at their store near Ground Zero in New York. It's like a temple for food. There are mountains of fruits and vegetables and chocolates and olive oils. And look at the seafood counter; there are shiny whole fish and fragile filets and mussels and clams and shrimps - they're all nestled in beds of ice.

CARRIE BROWNSTEIN: I'm Carrie Brownstein. I'm the Global Seafood Quality Standards coordinator. And we're here to talk about seafood sustainability.

ZWERDLING: She says companies like Whole Foods have to move to sustainable seafood. Fish and shellfish caught in the sea are the only major foods left that people still get in the wilds. Brownstein cites a recent study from the United Nations. It warns that almost 30 percent of the world's fisheries are over-exploited, which means that people are fishing them faster than they can rebound. And most of the other fisheries are near their limit. So, push them any more and they could decline.

BROWNSTEIN: We can't just go out and find more fish to catch.

ZWERDLING: You're convinced people need to be worry about seafood and the oceans.

BROWNSTEIN: Yeah, people need to be careful. People need to be careful. And I think that retailers like Whole Foods and other companies can play a huge role in making a difference for the oceans.

ZWERDLING: So, Whole Foods has promised to sell as much seafood as it can that the Marine Stewardship Council says is sustainable. There are other groups that decide which seafood's good or bad for the environment. For instance, one rates them green, yellow or red, like traffic lights. But the MSC system is the most expensive. They say they've certified more than \$3 billion worth of seafood.

Brownstein points to the fish with the blue MSC logo.

BROWNSTEIN: We have a number of MSC-certified fish here right now. We've got halibut, king salmon, Chilean sea bass...

ZWERDLING: The logo is an abstract fish with a check mark.

BROWNSTEIN: ...and swordfish.

ZWERDLING: And the logo proclaims the words...

BROWNSTEIN: Certified sustainable by the Marine Stewardship Council.

ZWERDLING: In other words, the MSC promises that if you buy this seafood, you won't contribute to over-fishing. And you won't be killing off other life in the sea, whether it's dolphins or coral.

A mother has just parked her baby stroller at the seafood counter. Rebecca Weel says she depends on the MSC and Whole Foods to tell her what to buy.

REBECCA WEEL: I want to feel that I'm doing the right thing without putting too much effort into figuring it out on my own.

(LAUGHTER)

ZWERDLING: Now, if you see two fish, one says MSC-certified sustainable and the other one doesn't...

WEEL: I would definitely choose the sustainable one over the not-sustainable one.

ZWERDLING: Are you willing to pay any more for fish that's sustainably certified?

WEEL: I would personally, yes.

ZWERDLING: Brownstein wouldn't give details, but she said that Whole Foods does charge more for some seafood that's labeled by the MSC. So, ocean specialists say you might be troubled to hear something that Whole Foods and the MSC are not telling you.

GERRY LEAPE: In our view, we would prefer they didn't use the word sustainable.

ZWERDLING: Gerry Leape helps oversee oceans programs for the Pew Charitable Trusts. He's worked with the MSC for more than 10 years on their official advisory council. And I asked him...

When one of our listeners goes to the supermarket and they see that MSC label - this seafood is sustainable - can they believe it's true?

(LAUGHTER)

ZWERDLING: That's a long pause.

LEAPE: It is a long pause. You can't believe across the board that it's necessarily sustainable.

ZWERDLING: Or ask a biologist named Susanna Fuller. She co-directs the Marine Program at the Ecology Action Center in Canada.

When I go to the supermarket and I see there's fish with a blue label - certified sustainable - and other fish that aren't, should I buy the MSC fish?

SUSANNA FULLER: You know, I - you - you know, you're - it's a gamble.

ZWERDLING: To understand why many environmentalists say it's a gamble, I joined a research trip one morning off the coast of Nova Scotia.

(SOUNDBITE OF AN ENGINE)

ZWERDLING: Remember the MSC swordfish, back at Whole Foods? The chain gets some of it from the swordfish industry right here in Canada's waters. Just last spring, the MSC labeled it certified sustainable.

ART: My name is Art. My first mate here is Kyle. If you're going to get sick, if you're going to get sick, come out here and throw up out here. Do not throw up inside.

ZWERDLING: We're on a 34-footer called Dig It. And we're heading straight into the Atlantic Ocean. The scientist who's leading this expedition is Steve Campana. He doesn't study swordfish. He runs

the Canadian government's Shark Research Laboratory, near Halifax. His studies are one reason why many environmentalists around the world say you can't trust the MSC label.

Most swordfish boats are called longliners. They let out up to 40 miles of fishing line, dangling with a thousand hooks. And studies show those hooks accidentally catch tens of thousands of sharks every year. Campana says, especially blue sharks. They're called bycatch.

STEVE CAMPANA: One average, from what we've seen over the years, the swordfisherman catch about five blue sharks for every one swordfish. So that suggests that it's not really a swordfish fishery that happens to catch sharks, it's a shark fishery that happens to catch swordfish.

ZWERDLING: That's one way of putting it. This should be crucial information for the Marine Stewardship Council. Their rules say that a fishery is not sustainable, if it's depleting the population of target fish. That's not the case here, studies suggest that the swordfish themselves are in good shape. But the MSC rules also says that a fishery is not sustainable if it causes too much damage to other animals in the sea.

The Canadian government appoints and finances an agency that studies disappearing wildlife. And the agency warns that the kinds of sharks the swordfishermen accidentally catch are threatened or endangered or of special concern. I told my mother the other day that I was going to come out on this boat. And my mother said, why do I care about sharks? I like eating the swordfish.

CAMPANA: Sharks are, well, they're, they're the king of the food chain. So they are the equivalent of the lions on the Serengeti Plains of Africa. And if you suddenly wiped out all of the lions, undoubtedly, you would find very strange things happen to the ecosystem there, probably unpredictable things.

ZWERDLING: So, a lot of scientists and environmentalists told us, we don't get it - how can the MSC say the swordfish industry is sustainable? We'll come back to that question in a moment and to this research boat. But first, a quick history of the MSC. Let's go back to 1992.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NEWS CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #1: Good evening. The news was expected but that didn't make it any less devastating. It's a moratorium on fishing on Northern Cod, a ban that will affect about 20,000 people and gut the backbone of the Atlantic fishery...

ZWERDLING: One of the most important fisheries in the world had collapsed. Canada's cod industry had been worth an estimated \$700 million a year. CBC Television announced their government was dealing with the crisis by making cod fishing illegal.

(SOUNDBITE OF ARCHIVED NEWS CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #2: And with that, fishermen stormed the doors of John Crosby's news conference.

(SOUNDBITE OF A CROWD AND YELLING)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN #2: Security guards locked the doors and frantically called for help.

MICHAEL SUTTON: Thousands of people thrown out of jobs, the closure of the cod fisheries.

ZWERDLING: Mike Sutton ran the oceans programs back then for the World Wildlife Fund.

SUTTON: I mean, it was so bad in some of these coastal communities, they had to - the government had to send in suicide prevention teams.

ZWERDLING: Sutton says the collapse of the cod industry shocked people. They finally realized the oceans are in big trouble. And Sutton says the crisis proved something else: the government agencies around the world that were supposed to protect the oceans were often doing a lousy job.

SUTTON: We were not only trashing out marine environment, but we were ruining the character of coastal communities that had existed on fisheries for centuries. So we needed to do something drastic.

ZWERDLING: Sutton and his colleagues said, we have a solution. Since government officials aren't protecting the oceans, let's convince industry they have to do it. Sutton met with executives at Unilever. They were one of the biggest seafood suppliers in the world.

SUTTON: My pitch to Unilever was, the future of their frozen fish business is at stake. Overfishing is not only bad for the environment but it's really bad for business because it means that they're not going to have fish in the future the way they have them today.

ZWERDLING: And in 1997, Unilever and the World Wildlife Fund joined hands. They set up the Marine Stewardship Council. So, the MSC was a balancing act between industry and the environment from the day they opened their doors. The headquarters are down the street from St. Paul's Cathedral in London.

RUPERT HOWES: MSC has a global vision. We want to see the global oceans transformed onto a sustainable basis.

ZWERDLING: That's the man who runs the MSC, Rupert Howes. These offices could be a software company. They are designer chic, lots of glass, hardly anybody wears a tie. The MSC is registered non-profit.

HOWES: Okay. MSC employs about 100 people around the world. We have 12 offices globally. On this floor, we have over here our fundraising team...

ZWERDLING: And here's the MSC's basic idea. More and more food companies want to look green, right? Some want to help the environment. Some want to attract customers. But when it comes to seafood, those executives don't know which fishing companies are plundering the ocean and which ones are doing a good job, so the MSC system studies it for them.

All food companies have to do is offer seafood with a blue MSC label, certified sustainable - and they can probably tell consumers, hey...

HOWES: We care where our fish comes from. We care how it was fished.

ZWERDLING: And as more and more food companies sell seafood with the MSC label, fisheries that don't have it will think we better get certified, too, or we're going to lose business to our competitors. Howes calls this the MSC's theory of change.

HOWES: The theory of change is very, very simple. If we could use a certification and labeling program to create an incentive for fisheries to improve the way they fish the oceans, we could catalyze real and lasting change in the way the oceans are fished.

ZWERDLING: But it turned out that during the MSC's early years, the American Food Industry wasn't excited about sustainable seafood. In fact, Michael Sutton, who helped create it, says the MSC almost went bankrupt. The MSC's budget comes partly from foundation grants and part of it comes from getting licensing fees from businesses that sell seafood with the MSC label.

So as long as many supermarket chains weren't promoting it, the MSC wasn't getting much money. But starting in 2005, the MSC and its supporters sent a series of delegations to Bentonville, Arkansas, headquarters of Wal-Mart, and everything changed.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: Wal-Mart is one of the largest retail purchasers of wild cod and farmed seafood.

ZWERDLING: That's a Wal-Mart company video. Mike Sutton and the other delegates helped convince Wal-Mart's executives to make a promise. Wal-Mart would sell as much seafood as possible that's certified sustainable in all their American stores.

(SOUNDBITE OF VIDEO)

UNIDENTIFIED WOMAN: The goal of the seafood network is to have our wild cod fisheries certified by the MSC, or Marine Stewardship Council, an...

SUTTON: We had to get Wal-Mart and the significance of their commitment, of course, is that once Wal-Mart made a commitment to the Marine Stewardship Council, every other major retailer had to follow suit because none of them wanted to be less progressive than Wal-Mart.

ZWERDLING: Target promised to go sustainable. Kroger and Costco promised, too. The problem was the MSC had not labeled enough seafood sustainable.

SUTTON: Overnight, the demand far outstripped the supply and so the suppliers had to catch up.

ZWERDLING: Listen to this fact. Since Wal-Mart embraced sustainable seafood in 2006, the MSC system has certified at least seven times as many fisheries as it did during the same period before. And critics say they've compromised their standards to do it. And that brings us back to Steve Campana. He is the government scientist on the research boat off the coast of Halifax.

CAMPANA: We are hoping to get some satellite tags onto blue sharks.

ZWERDLING: Remember, studies showed that the Canadian swordfish boats accidentally catch five times as many sharks as swordfish. The swordfishermen generally release most of those sharks, but until Campana came along, nobody had really studied what happened to the sharks after the fishermen let them off the hooks. So about six years ago, Campana started tagging a random sample of sharks with a satellite gizmo before the swordfishermen let them go.

On this particular outing, Campana's not on a commercial swordfish boat. He's on a charter that does sport fishing. He's also studying how that affects sharks. The captain has tossed out a fishing line with a chunk of mackerel on the hook.

CAMPANA: We have a shark. Yeah, baby.

ZWERDLING: The shark's really thrashing.

CAMPANA: Yep.

ZWERDLING: They haul a blue shark up on the boat. It's about five feet long, wild eyes. Two men hold it down.

CAMPANA: The flipper just knocked his hat off.

ZWERDLING: They record the vitals.

CAMPANA: Sex? Female.

ZWERDLING: Female. Then Campana jabs a tube into the skin. It looks like a turkey baster with a barb on the end, which attaches to the shark.

CAMPANA: They're not like mammals. They're not like people. They don't feel pain the same way.

ZWERDLING: The tracking device will record where the shark goes, how long it stays there. And then, about 10 months from now, the tube will pop off the shark and float to the surface and it'll beam the information by satellite to Campana.

CAMPANA: All right. So the satellite tag's in. Good to go here.

ZWERDLING: And they ease her back into the ocean. This shark looks okay for now, but Campana's studies show that up to 35 percent of the sharks caught by swordfish boats die within days after they're caught. Add it all up and Campana's findings suggest that Canadian swordfish boats accidentally kill almost two sharks for every swordfish they catch.

Other studies estimate that the populations of major kinds of sharks in the North Atlantic have plunged 40 percent, even 60 percent in just the past few decades.

CAMPANA: Any time you see, you know, consistent declines like that and the fact that all of these large sharks seem to have declined all over the world, for them all to be declining, it's just a worrisome pattern.

ZWERDLING: Campana published some of his major findings back in 2009 and they couldn't have come at a worse time for Canada's swordfish industry because only a few months before, the industry's president had gone to the Marine Stewardship Council. He said, we want Canadian swordfish to be certified sustainable.

Now, here was a troubling study about bycatch by one of the government's top researchers. The industry president didn't buy it.

TROY ATKINSON: I had a disagreement with the results. They were not close to what the industry felt was reality.

ZWERDLING: You're basically rejecting the findings of, you know, one of the most respected shark scientists.

ATKINSON: Yep, I am.

ZWERDLING: Troy Atkinson runs the Nova Scotia Swordfishermen's Association. It's based in Halifax. They catch most of the swordfish exported from Canada. Atkinson says, there are some studies out there that conclude that blue sharks in the North Atlantic are doing great.

ATKINSON: We're sometimes portrayed as a bunch of cowboys out to harvest the last buffalo, you know. We're portrayed as, you know, some of the worst in the world. And it's just not correct.

ZWERDLING: You're saying that your swordfish fleet could be catching or killing more blue sharks and the oceans would still be healthy.

ATKINSON: Correct. Yes, that is indeed the fact.

ZWERDLING: Actually, the evidence is contradictory. It suggests that scientists don't know for sure what's happening to sharks across the Atlantic. For instance, the optimistic researchers that Atkinson cites who say that blue sharks are doing great, they acknowledge that their conclusions are highly uncertain - their words - because they're based on all kinds of assumptions and incomplete data.

On the other hand, studies that show that blue sharks have sharply declined focus on a limited region. So some scientists and environmentalists were dumbfounded last year when the Marine Stewardship Council added up all this confusion and they proclaimed Canada's swordfish industry is certified sustainable. Is it sustainable?

FULLER: No, no. It's not at all.

ZWERDLING: That's Susanna Fuller again, from the Ecology Action Center in Halifax. The Center joined forces with other groups like the Sierra Club, Oceana, the Shark Research Institute and they denounced the MSC. They said a small amount of Canada's swordfish is caught with harpoons and we're all for that. But 90 percent of the swordfish comes from longline boats, which studies

show catch tens of thousands of sharks. How can the MSC call that sustainable?

FULLER: It's so egregious. We said, you know, why are you guys doing this because we're trying to actually help get some trust behind that label? And by certifying this fishery, you are just, like, undermining a whole bunch of consumer trust.

ZWERDLING: The analysts who evaluated the fishery for the MSC system agreed that the swordfish boats do kill large numbers of sharks and they agreed that the optimistic studies on sharks are uncertain. Still, they concluded that when you put all the evidence together, it is highly likely, their words, that there are plenty of blue sharks left in the sea. The analysts also said that other countries kill way more sharks than Canada's swordfishermen do, so Canada's only a small part of the bycatch problem.

We asked the head of the MSC in London what he thinks about bycatch. Rupert Howes. Suppose you said to your family, listen guys, every time we eat a swordfish here in our house, the fishermen who caught it killed two sharks and just dumped their bodies in the ocean. How would your family react to that?

HOWES: It's a very good question and I think it illustrates a key feature of the MSC program, which is the fact that the program is premised on science and evidence. That fishery has met the MSC standard. We are not saying that shark bycatch doesn't matter. What we're saying implicit within the labeling of that fishery is, the shark bycatch of that unique individual certified fishery is safe. It's within ecological limits.

ZWERDLING: Back on Dig It, off the coast of Canada, I ask the scientist who is studying the sharks, Steve Campana, given all your studies that show that the swordfish industry is accidentally killing huge numbers of sharks, how can the Marine Stewardship Council say that this swordfish industry is sustainable?

CAMPANA: That's an excellent question and I don't have the answer to that.

JIM BARNES: Well, I don't know why he ducked that one. Well, I think the answer's obvious.

ZWERDLING: Jim Barnes is a lawyer. He runs an international coalition of 30 environmental groups. He says ever since the Wal-Marts of the world said they want sustainable seafood, it's been a blessing for the sustainable movement and a curse.

BARNES: The bottom line is that there are not enough truly sustainable fisheries on the earth to sustain the demand. The retailers and wholesalers all want access to this kind of label because they're trying to, you know, make money with their consumers. Again, there's nothing wrong with that. That's how the world works.

ZWERDLING: Jim Barnes, are you saying that the MSC system is rushing to certify seafood as sustainable when they know it's not, at least partly because they need to fill the seafood counters of Wal-Mart and other huge chains?

BARNES: Yes, in some cases, they're doing that. I'm not down on Wal-Mart at all, don't get me wrong. But to get on line with big chains as your goal leads you down a path that I don't think the originators of the MSC intended.

HOWES: If you really want to contribute to the transformation of our economic systems more generally, you've got to engage with the big guys.

ZWERDLING: The MSC's president, Rupert Howes.

HOWES: And therefore, I absolutely welcome Wal-Mart's commitment. That will drive change. And so your question about will that overload the MSC system? No.

ZWERDLING: Howes says there's no way the MSC could label problem fisheries just to satisfy demand, because, he says, the certifiers evaluate every fishery based only on scientific evidence. But Howes says, you also have to realize, this is the real world. There is no such thing as perfection.

HOWES: We want to see oceans fished sustainably forever. We're not going to achieve that by becoming a small niche organization that engages with a handful of perfect fisheries.

ZWERDLING: Even the biggest critics told me that the Marine Stewardship Council has accomplished some important things and they say maybe here's the most important, the MSC has helped get people to think about sustainable seafood. Back when the MSC got started, not many people did. But NPR conducted a survey for this story with a company called Truven Health Analytics.

The results show that almost 80 percent of Americans who eat seafood regularly said it is important or it's very important that their seafood is sustainably caught. Daniel Zwerdling, NPR News.

SIEGEL: Our story was co-reported by NPR's Margot Williams. Tomorrow, critics say the MSC can make a positive difference when it honors its original goals. Meanwhile, you can learn more about the pros and cons of sustainable seafood at NPR.org.

Copyright © 2013 NPR. All rights reserved. No quotes from the materials contained herein may be used in any media without attribution to NPR. This transcript is provided for personal, noncommercial use only, pursuant to our Terms of Use. Any other use requires NPR's prior permission. Visit our permissions page for further information.

NPR transcripts are created on a rush deadline by a contractor for NPR, and accuracy and availability may vary. This text may not be in its final form and may be updated or revised in the future. Please be aware that the authoritative record of NPR's programming is the audio.