

Sustainable Tuna Fisheries: Management and Perception

Eugene Lapointe, President
IWMC World Conservation Trust
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Mister Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

My fourth participation in INFOFISH Tuna since 2002 is certainly both a rewarding and humbling experience. If I make a balance sheet of these six years, I notice that many changes occurred in Fisheries. New technologies to improve harvesting have been developed. New safeguards have been implemented. New regulatory bodies have been created. New problems and difficulties have surfaced. Several major international meetings, of relevance to fisheries, have taken place: two meetings of the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild fauna and Flora (CITES), one meeting of the World Conservation Union (IUCN) and six meetings of the International Whaling Commission (IWC). One might claim that IWC does not have anything to do with fisheries, it takes care of whales. Not quiet so! At the 2003 IWC meeting in Berlin, the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) caused a major scandal to break: commercial fisheries operations were held responsible for the death of 300,000 cetaceans every year.

While changes have taken place during those six years, some elements have remained unchanged.

What has not changed is that Fisheries continue to be an issue of heightened importance to “environmentalists” around the world. What have not changed are the abuses and harassments which the fishing community is subjected to. What has not changed either is the procrastination affecting a large portion of the fishing community. What has not changed...?

I would like to begin by introducing the premise that everybody here today cares about our planet and, more specifically, cares about fish stocks. I think we all want to see abundant fish stocks and we also want to see stocks well-managed. That is to say, most people would support the idea of sustainable fishing. We are all, to some extent, conservationists, whatever motive we have: conserving for the purpose of saving, conserving for being able to use for a prolonged period of time, or conserving for the sake of fundraising. I will always remember, years ago in the jungle of Bolivia, someone claiming to be a conservationist who really wanted to

save the caiman crocodile, because, he said, “if it disappears, I will not be able to poach anymore.”

I overtly state “we are all conservationists” because most people want the same basic outcome of successfully managed fisheries. Where we often differ, is over our analysis of the situation, the best approach going forward and the true agenda we are pursuing.

Now, that said, it is not possible to consider the debate on fisheries without acknowledging some of the key interests involved. Many of you here today, involved in various aspects of tuna fisheries, are motivated by business imperatives. And there is absolutely nothing wrong with that. But you are not the only ones with a business interest in the issue as it is debated.

First, the campaign groups need to attract revenue just like any other business. And they will be more successful if they portray themselves as objective, credible, compassionate and independent. If on one hand, I am not suggesting that activists are driven solely by pecuniary rewards, it still remains that the groups they work for are businesses too.

Second, another important player in the debate is the media, which, of course, has an interest in selling its product. News organizations will go out of business if consumers are not tempted to buy their newspapers and magazines or tune into TV bulletins and documentaries. So it should not be surprising that the mainstream media tends to report resource issues in general in a sensationalist manner (*Cry Scandal*). This is the case with energy, this is the case with wild species, this is the case with agriculture and it is certainly the case with fisheries.

Finally, a third group of interested and important players... politicians. We all know that once human beings have tasted the advantages of political power, they are not going to let it go easily. They will do everything to get re-elected and to sell themselves. So politicians are also, in a sense, business partners.

There is an interesting link between these three types of businesses: as we say in fisheries, they feed on the same grounds... scandals. Pressure groups will be successful in fundraising, media will sell its copies and politicians will be re-elected if they rely on sensationalism often to the detriment of pragmatism and factual information.

Bearing this in mind, it is also important that we focus for a moment on the issue of trade, often designated as the main cause of conservation problems. Take all the major campaigns by pressure groups – whales, fur, ivory, fish - *trade and commerce* are the main target. Throughout mankind's history, trade has played an important role in the improvement of human conditions. It fosters relationships among individuals, communities, cultures and nations. It opens closed borders and closed minds, allowing people to jettison ignorance, suspicion and fear of one another. It provides wealth that in turn is used for food, shelter, education, health care, and individual and cultural advancement. Most importantly, it is a powerful tool in efforts to eliminate poverty, which is the greatest threat to wild resources and one of the chief causes of pollution.

This is not to say that there are not potential downsides to trade. There are... and they have to be managed. For example, all those involved in trade in wild resources have a responsibility to ensure that this does not lead to the endangerment of species. And this is a shared responsibility – it belongs to people in consuming states just as it does to those in producing countries.

In the case of fisheries, this responsibility takes many forms today. The global fisheries trade is worth around \$60 billion and it is therefore of great importance to countries all around the world. Regional and international agreements are implemented that are designed to limit and regulate catches in various ways so that stocks do not become over-exploited.

For decades now, I have been trying to find the right balance between wild resources harvesting and regulation. It is a complex issue. Hunting bans, trade bans are widely promoted as the only possible conservation solutions... but this, in my view, is short-sighted. In reality, they seldom work as advertised. Still, what you tend to read about in the media are campaigns to save *the species du jour* – and right now the fish species are very popular on the menu - by building up restrictions, limitations and prohibitions. All of you here have been at the front row of the dolphin-friendly tuna, but there are many other examples such as *the turtle free shrimp* and *the whale friendly lobster harvesting*. Often, commerce-oriented solutions are ignored when, in reality, prohibitions are not the solution, they are part of the problem when it is not the entire problem itself.

With around 25 per cent of fish stocks over-exploited, conflicts inevitably arise when politicians decide to regulate catches by imposing restrictive limits. And since demand continues to rise as global wealth expands, concerns are inevitably voiced about how to meet it. After all, global consumption of fish has doubled since 1973.

Naturally, people want to avoid conflict and collapses of fish stocks that can come with the so-called “tragedy of the commons”, which provides an incentive for over-exploitation of resources. One response has been to tackle the supply-side by establishing stock management programs, often including a series of measures such as quotas, licenses, harvesting seasons and monitoring procedures.

Others have noted over the years the limitations of such an approach. Non-members of an agreement may move into the area to exploit a resource that has now become even more valuable to catch. There is the perennial problem of IUU. Even with improved policing techniques, resources are never likely to be sufficient to ensure that restrictions are adhered to. And the costs of meeting monitoring measures hit developing countries particularly hard.

There is another problem with this type of approach. That is, it can be exploited by those who are philosophically opposed to the utilization of resources. To many campaign groups, an institutional management process is the equivalent of blood in the water for sharks. It provides the perfect vehicle for increasing restrictions – and a feeding frenzy inevitably follows. This is where harassment will start, created by the competition between various pressure groups tempted – often forced – to move further, with their solutions, than the other groups, with court actions, promotion of bans, calls for boycotts, etc.

Campaigners use a number of techniques to further their cause. First and foremost, they take the inevitable uncertainties that exist with stock estimates to construct arguments that purport to show that stocks “could be” much lower than previously believed.

This is a dangerous road. It shifts the public debate into the area of “probability”, a complex subject that is not well understood by the average man in the street. Instead of acting as an obstacle to their calls for greater restrictions, the knowledge of the marketplace is turned around, largely by supposition, to elevate concerns and win public support for greater restrictions.

Campaign groups also make ethical arguments. Again they turn an obstacle into an aid. With charismatic wildlife – like elephants, tigers, seals, sharks and whales – they focus on individual animals, even giving them names like Mr. Splashy Pants to give a greater sense of anthropomorphism. Since focusing on the value of the life of an individual fish would not carry the same resonance, the ethics angle is recast to cover the oceans themselves. They argue that we should not “empty” the oceans of fish, which is a proposition that most people will readily agree with. However, this is something of a red herring unless it describes what is really happening, what it really means.

So one result of management processes is that they tend to pit fishing interests against campaign groups. And what adds to the woes of fishing interests, it is the campaign groups who are expert in the craft of lobbying the governments that form these institutions. The fishing industry is very good at fishing but, in my view, it is not sufficiently resourced to come close to matching the campaign groups in terms of international or even national lobbying. The campaigners are able to devote large amounts of money and manpower to their campaigns, embracing legislators, bureaucrats, journalists and lawsuits that are planned to force government action where it is not forthcoming or where it is not handled their way.

I have a prediction to make, and I apologize for being so blunt. Tuna will never be caught in an acceptably sustainable manner. Of course, technically it is possible. But as a matter of public perception, tuna stocks will never be “safe” until tuna fishing is suspended. And if it is suspended, tuna stocks will only remain “safe” if the suspension is maintained. If you are not convinced, go and talk to some whalers.

This is a great pity because it makes it difficult for society as a whole to manage fisheries. We are caught in a dangerous Catch-22 where society wants to allow individuals and groups to influence decision-making on fishery resource and management policies but doing so makes good, scientifically-based outcomes increasingly unlikely, not to say impossible. And who are the losers? The losers are the fishermen, who may face greater restrictions than are necessary: the losers are the consumers who have to pay more for their fish; the losers are the institutions that suffer from increased politicization, internal conflict and lack of trust, and the losers are anybody who lives in unjustified fear that the oceans are, indeed, being emptied. Management programs have their place but they should not, in my view, be seen as a panacea to the over-exploitation of fish resources.

Another approach to resource management is to focus on demand-side measures. These can include import bans, taxes, price controls and educational campaigns, all designed to dampen demand. Campaign groups have gone further, trying to reduce demand for fisheries by arguing that various types of fish contain “high” levels of mercury. In January of this year, an organization called OCEANA, protecting the oceans, produced a report stating that tuna tested in the United States, showed mercury concentration ‘nearly twice as high as U.S. Food and Drug Administration estimates.’ In other words, some people will be sufficiently scared not to buy the products thus, ultimately – at least they hope - reducing catches and restoring stocks to desired levels. And, of course, there are already instruments in place that artificially raise prices such as tariffs and other trade barriers that restrict fish imports.

Each of these policies has its own problems. Import bans tend to stimulate the black market and may lead to more IUU. Taxes and price controls are always politically controversial and substitute products may not be able to meet increased demand. Educational campaigns, which should at least be factual, may not impact consumer behavior in the desired way.

Consumer choice is important in all areas of trade. Whatever institutional measures are employed to engineer sustainable fishing, they need to recognize that fish is a healthy food choice and that demand will continue to increase.

At the same time, ninety per cent of the 15 million people engaged in ocean and coastal fishing are small scale operators and fisheries exports have become important earners of foreign exchange in developing countries. Any solutions must take full account of these essential facts.

Finally, I would ask you all to consider how ethics has become the focus of the wider debate about fisheries. Ethics is the lens through which views on stock status and remedial actions tend to be considered today. There are people who believe it is always wrong to utilize an animal, whether for food, for shelter, for its skin or for some other purpose. I respect any individual’s right to make these choices for him or herself, but abhor any attempt to force this preference on others either directly or indirectly. Unfortunately, campaign groups have become part of the problem in finding effective management solutions for wildlife. This extends to fisheries and distorts the market for effective management solutions. But then again, their definition of a solution is far different from the sort of solution that I know... most of you have in mind.