

Innovative Approaches in Sustainable Seafood: Addressing Consumer Trends and Perceptions

Panel Session

This panel focused on consumer-related issues and included a diverse panel of restaurateurs, seafood processors, seafood marketers, and fisheries-related entities to comment on trends, perceptions, innovations, and current needs in the seafood market.

Discussion Questions

- **What is most important to the seafood consumers you work with (either your specific consumers, or in general). Are your consumers asking about sustainable seafood?**
- **How have you provided or addressed what consumers are asking for? If they are not asking you about sustainable seafood, how are you informing them about or promoting sustainable seafood? How and why do you think your approach has been successful?**
- **What challenges did you face and how did you address them? What challenges remain and what obstacles do you see to addressing them?**
- **Based on your experience, what parallels do you see with the challenges facing the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery and what insights can you offer?**

Panelists



Andrew Spurgin has designed and prepared menus and events honoring dignitaries and glitterati for over three decades, throughout the United States, in England, Canada, and Mexico. He grew up in London, working in his relative's restaurant and butcher

shop until his family moved to San Diego, California, in 1974. Andrew was formerly the executive chef and director of Waters Fine Catering & Event Design. His involvement in the sustainable seafood movement includes being the co-founder of Passionfish.org and Cooks Confab, a developer of the Blue Ocean Institute's "Green Chefs Blue Ocean" program, an associate board member of the Slow Food Urban San Diego convivium, and past member of the Director's Cabinet for the Scripps Institute of Oceanography. Andrew regularly lectures to the industry and public (including youth audiences) on sustainability, cooking, event design, culinary responsibility, and entertaining.



Joe Ciaramiterno is president of J & D Seafoods, Inc. in San Pedro. His father and grandfather were both commercial fishermen. He has been working in the industry in different facets for over 30 years. He started at Galletti Brothers in 1981 and worked in sales,

purchasing, and management before starting J & D Seafoods with his partner, Dino Lauro, in 1990. J & D Seafoods, Inc., grew from the ground up to one of the largest swordfish distributors nationwide. Joe also served on the PFMC's Highly

Migratory Species Advisory Subpanel, the board of the California Seafood Council, and the Fishing Task Force of the City of Los Angeles. Joe recognizes the importance of protecting the seafood industry along with sustainability of our environment and sea-life.



Steve Foltz is the director of sales and marketing for Chesapeake Fish Company. Chesapeake Fish has a dockside location in San Diego, California, which is hub to a modern processing facility and a fleet of refrigerated delivery trucks. Steve is

also chairman of the board of California Fisheries and Seafood Institute (CFSI), the nation's largest regional organization representing members of the consumer seafood supply industry. Steve's role with CFSI is to improve, preserve, and promote the seafood industry movement.



Sam King is president and chief executive officer of King's Seafood Company, which has developed and currently operates eighteen restaurants in southern California, Arizona, and Nevada. These include six signature restaurants, twelve King's Fish House's, and a seafood distribution operation. Sam is also the

co-founder of the Sustainable Seafood Forum and serves on several boards, including the Aquarium of the Pacific and the University of Southern California's Wrigley Institute for Environmental Studies.



Valerie Termini serves as staff to the California Ocean Protection Council as a project manager. Some of her projects include developing a California sustainable seafood eco-labeling program and working on projects that help to foster more sustainable fisheries along the coast of California. Valerie holds

a Master's degree from the Monterey Institute of International Studies.



Heather Mann has close to 20 years of experience working in and for the commercial fishing industry. She is the director of the Community Seafood Initiative and the lead developer for the North American and Pacific Fish Trax programs aimed at supporting sustainable fisheries with creative

real-time tools that track seafood products, link consumers and fishermen, and improve science, management, and marketing.



Dawn M. Martin joined SeaWeb in 2004, first as executive director and then as the organization's president and chair of the board for the organization. For more than 25 years, Martin has utilized creative communication strategies to advance policy and conservation goals.

She brings a multidisciplinary approach that builds on her organizational management experience and skills as an attorney, negotiator, strategic policy professional and communications specialist. Engaged from the beginning of the sustainable seafood movement, SeaWeb manages the Seafood Choices Alliance and, with its partner the Natural Resources Defense Council, launched the groundbreaking *Give Swordfish A Break* campaign that in many ways provided a foundation for the modern day sustainable seafood movement.



1. Experiences

Consumer awareness programs are shaping consumer seafood preferences

- Seafood recommendations and scoring schemes (e.g., wallet cards)
- Eco-labels and sustainability certifications

NGO campaigns and boycotts have powerful market effects

- Effective at identifying a course of action for consumers to follow
- Restrict consumer choices

Restaurants play a pivotal role in informing consumers about seafood

- 67% of all seafood consumed in the United States is consumed in restaurants
- Many chefs are interested in learning about and serving sustainable seafood

Product labels are becoming essential in the seafood marketplace

- Enables product differentiation
- Empowers consumers to choose sustainably and locally harvested seafood

Imported seafood is prolific

- Approximately 84 percent of seafood in the United States is imported
- Distributors and restaurants have to fill the supply gap; *"people want to eat fish so [we] have to import seafood."*

2. Challenges

Outdated and inaccurate seafood scores and recommendations can have unintended negative effects

- Fishermen suffer economic penalties when negative scores and impressions lag behind positive changes in the fishery
- Negative scores based on oversimplified and generalized information can be unfair to local or regional fisheries operating under responsible management regimes

Campaigns and boycotts based on misinformation can be harmful

- Fisheries are highly susceptible to boycotts based on misinformation (e.g., thresher shark boycott in 2010)
- It can be difficult for retailers not to succumb to the pressures

Retailers are challenged to maintain a consistent and current knowledge-base about seafood data and issues

- Generally, only one or two employees in a retail establishment are aware of sustainable seafood issues and lead consumer awareness and education efforts
- Staff turnover can greatly impact a business's ability to maintain a commitment to informing their consumers about seafood sustainability

Quality assurance and control for seafood products

- Demand for product labels creates a need for tracing seafood through the supply chain
- Seafood mislabeling and fraud in the marketplace is an issue
- Distributors need reliable product and fisheries information

Not enough U.S. seafood available

- Hard for chefs, restaurateurs, and retailers to find enough domestic seafood to supply their customers
- Suppliers are willing to promote local, domestic seafood, but must do so while continuing to promote other imported menu items

3. Obstacles to Addressing Challenges

Barriers exist to increasing consumer awareness about seafood sustainability

- This trend is still young
- Various opinions and evaluation criteria about what constitutes “sustainable seafood” is creating confusion for consumers
- *“When Americans get confused about seafood, they eat chicken.”*
- Consumer willingness to pay a premium for sustainable seafood is questionable. Without a greater appreciation of the product, *“price point drives all.”*

There is not a strong culture of seafood consumerism in the United States

- Not all consumers will be keenly interested in learning more about sustainable seafood
- Most Americans do not cook seafood at home even though *“fish are easy to cook.”*
- Need to help consumers learn about and prepare seafood “beyond the basics of tuna, salmon, and shrimp”

Capacity to trace seafood products through the supply chain

- Lack of mechanisms to: (1) enforce claims of origin, and (2) ensure that retailers truly selling sustainable products are not economically hurt by unscrupulous competitors
- Labels, such as MSC, are very expensive for fishermen to pursue

More fishing opportunities are needed to supply local, sustainable U.S. seafood

- Creating demand for local and sustainable seafood will only be effective if there is a supply
- Fishermen will need to have access to productive fishing grounds to meet demand

4. Insights & Potential Solutions

Ensure seafood scores are up-to-date

- Revise scores and recommendations often to keep them current
- Use new technologies that can widely distribute updated information more quickly than printed wallet cards

Adopt positive seafood messages based on facts

- NMFS, through NOAA FishWatch, could play a helpful leadership role in providing the facts (see Appendix C for FishWatch link)
- Any campaign must be based on solid data and address any lingering bycatch and mercury issues
- Coordination and communication is needed between consumer awareness efforts and NGOs, industry, and government (e.g., the positive thresher shark workshop experience)

Tell the story of the fishery

- Tell consumers the *“story of the swordfish fishery”* to differentiate U.S. west coast swordfish products from others in the marketplace
- Embrace the images and stories of individual fishermen, as that is seen to be very effective with customers
- *“When there is a story attached to a seafood product, all of a sudden it has value and is no longer just a fish.”*
- Make personal connections (e.g., FishTrax)

Take steps to enhance traceability of seafood products

- Need enforcement of labeling requirements
- Determine whether traceability is a role for the government or if non-government entities can adequately provide such a mechanism
- Explore existing systems (e.g., Food and Drug Administration)

Build credibility with consumers and stakeholders

- Consider a self-imposed industry “turtle conservation tax” to acquire and protect nesting beaches throughout the Pacific Basin and demonstrate a commitment to an environmentally sustainable fishery
- Collaborate with NGOs that can support the fishery’s sustainability message
- Build authentic partnerships among fishermen, NGOs, and others to launch a campaign (i.e., fishermen have the story to tell, but typically do not have the marketing expertise or networks)



Panel Summary

This summary captures key points and perspectives during the panel and following discussions; it does not represent consensus views.

- **Consumer awareness about sustainable seafood is growing, but significant challenges remain ahead.** Panelists see significant growth in consumer awareness of and interest in sustainable seafood, pointing to increased interest among retailers, “buy local” campaigns, and the proliferation of “scoring” cards. However, speakers noted, the trend is still emerging, but the majority of consumers unaware or uninformed and the barriers to deepening awareness are significant. Several speakers questioned consumer willingness to pay higher prices for sustainable seafood. Without a deeper understanding and appreciation for the product, consumer decisions are driven by cost. One panelist reiterated several times that consumer awareness is only effective and worthwhile if there is a supply of domestic seafood to meet demand.
- **Numerous sustainable seafood marketing campaigns exist, but they lack a unified approach and common definition for sustainable seafood.** Programs addressing sustainable seafood (e.g., Monterey Bay Aquarium scorecard, Marine Stewardship Council certification, NOAA FishWatch) are helping consumers to generally become more aware of the topic. However, the variety of approaches and criteria used to define “sustainable seafood” is confusing to customers. Because parts of the United States do not have a deeply-rooted seafood-consuming culture and history, this confusion can become a significant barrier to effective seafood marketing and lead consumers to instead opt for familiar staples, like chicken. Several speakers suggested that NMFS, through NOAA FishWatch, could play a helpful role in clarifying the disparate seafood messages and perhaps become a leading source for sustainable seafood information.
- **Seafood product labeling creates opportunities, but also challenges.** Labeling is essential to meet consumer demand for sustainably and locally harvested seafood. Labeling is also necessary for the U.S. west coast swordfish fishery if it is to differentiate its products. However, as the demand for labeling spreads, more challenges arise in verifying the labels.
- **The ability to trace seafood through the supply chain is emerging as a significant problem.** Panelists explained that there are few effective mechanisms to:
 - enforce claims of origin (e.g., country or fishery), and
 - ensure that those selling truly sustainable seafood products are not economically hurt by competitors selling fraudulent and mislabeled products.

One participant suggested that the existing Food and Drug Administration’s Hazard Analysis and Critical Control Points system may provide an efficient platform for tackling these traceability considerations.

- **Consumers may shy away from certain seafood products based on lingering impressions from past boycotts and/or unknowingly avoid sustainable products based on out-of-date seafood scorecards.** New technologies such as social media websites and smart phone applications have the potential to quickly distribute changes in recommendations due to fishery status updates. Fishermen say they suffer an economic penalty when new scores and impressions lag behind what is truly happening in the fishery. Fisheries have been highly susceptible to negative campaigns and boycotts, many of which have been based on misinformation. For example, in December 2010, several southern California retailers temporarily stopped carrying thresher shark due to an NGO boycott based on misinformation. When distributors were unable to move thresher shark products to retailers, the market glut that resulted reduced fishing opportunities and profits.