



Sink or swim: Hong Kong can take a lead in Asia by supporting a certification scheme to save world fish stocks¹

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It is now widely accepted that the world's fish stocks are under threat from the combined effects of over-fishing, pollution and even climate change. These problems may seem remote and intractable, but for all of us who eat seafood, they are issues with which we engage, knowingly or not, each time we find fish on our plates.

Fish are arguably the most migratory, least visible and hardest-to-police food supplies. For many coastal states with rich resources but limited financial, governance and scientific capacities, fisheries management is still in its infancy. At the other end of the spectrum are regional fisheries management organisations responsible for managing some of the world's most valuable commercial species, including tuna, swordfish and cod. But even these organisations have not been able to prevent severe depletions from occurring.

One reason for this is poor data. As anyone who has read the book or seen the movie *The Perfect Storm* knows, there is an inherent incentive for fishermen to be as secretive as possible about where, when and how they catch fish. This can lead to huge biases as fishermen under-record catches of target species to avoid exceeding regulatory limits.

On top of this, illegal or pirate fishing operations, estimated to be as high as 19% of the total catch, provide no records whatsoever. Assumptions necessary to mathematically model changes in fish populations compound these data-quality issues. Not surprisingly, the results of such models are often so uncertain that, where some scientists see a stock in decline, others see no need to reduce fishing efforts. Even when all scientists agree, calls for catch reductions often go unheeded because of the political fallout of cutting quotas.

Hong Kong has a poor record of fisheries management. Despite receiving strong recommendations in 1998 to start licensing fishing vessels, the Hong Kong government has yet to do so. Its fisheries management scheme remains one of Asia's most primitive. Though clearly not a major fishing power, Hong Kong's global footprint on fish stocks is enormous for its size. The city has for years profited handsomely from trade in shark fin, live reef fishes and abalone, several species of which are now listed by

the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species. The Hong Kong government claims that managing these resources is the responsibility of the producing countries. Yet many of them have weak or nonexistent management capacities.

Hong Kong should realise that effective trade monitoring here may be the only way to sustain these species. But, in the case of live reef fish, all species except humphead wrasse usually arrive by boat from South-east Asia; they are exempted from customs reporting and declared only on a voluntary basis.

Meanwhile, exciting developments are occurring on the demand side of fisheries management. One of these is the partnership between scientists, fishermen, businesses and consumers embodied in the independent, non-profit Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). It runs a global eco-labeling scheme for wild-caught fish that meet strict sustainability standards. Worldwide, 26 species comprising 7% of the global edible seafood catch are either certified or currently under MSC assessment.

A few years ago Wal-Mart, the world's largest retailer, announced that in the following three to five years it would acquire all its fresh and frozen products from MSC-certified fisheries. Initially introduced in Europe and the United States, the MSC recently opened an office in Japan and launched several products in Japan and Hong Kong.

The beauty of the MSC model is that it shortcuts the political stalemates that stymie most fisheries management systems. Once a fishery is judged to meet MSC standards, consumers — including major retailers and the catering industry — can decide to support it by buying its products.

This is not altruism. The business advantage in avoiding threats to the supply chain by acquiring sustainable seafood should make as much sense in the Asian market as it does in Europe and the United States.

Hong Kong needs to recognise its role in the current problems facing fisheries, as well as its role in the solution. The MSC provides local business and consumer communities with a chance to directly support the sound management of marine resources, through their purchasing choices, and to lead Asia by example.

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