

Building confidence in certified seafood

by Herman Wisse

The increasing range of certification schemes causes confusion from seafood producers through retailers and right down to the consumer, who often ends up bearing the costs involved. The GSSI Global Benchmark Tool offers a unique multi-stakeholder solution to bring clarity to the industry from the production through the retail stages.

The certification landscape

Landing in Ca Mau in the Mekong Delta, Vietnam, among its patchwork of shrimp ponds that range from large-scale intensive operations to small extensive farms embedded in the mangroves, you find yourself in one of the most important producer regions worldwide.



Credit : GSSI 2015

It's part of the trend of a global rise in seafood production to meet a growing demand. Per capita fish consumption has more than doubled since 1961 and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) estimates that by 2030, world fish production will have to increase by more than 20 million tonnes to 187 million tonnes. To help to minimise the overall environmental impact of how we catch, grow and deliver seafood to meet this growing demand, certification becomes increasingly important.

In many regions like Ca Mau the story of seafood certification plays out daily

in the lives of local businesses. Here, for a producer to access different markets, they often have to bear multiple audit costs for different seafood certification schemes to satisfy buyers' demands. For smallholder farmers, the costs involved to meet these multiple certifications are often too high. Even as cooperatives, they can be dependent on a specific market and its fluctuations.

Thousands of kilometres away, at the other end of the supply chain, the expansion in seafood certification schemes has been leading to confusion, making decision-making more difficult across the board. Retailers talk about having dozens of certification schemes or labels to choose from. Knowing what a credible certification scheme looks like is a challenge, as is trying to make sense of it for consumers. In the end it's making seafood more costly for everyone.



Credit : GSSI 2015

Building confidence in certified seafood matters across the seafood supply chain. That's the mission of the Global

Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) - a global platform and partnership of seafood companies, NGOs, experts, governmental and intergovernmental organisations - which has been operating since 2013.

GSSI's Benchmark Tool to be launched soon



Credit : GSSI 2015

In autumn 2015, GSSI will launch its Global Benchmark Tool for seafood certification schemes. The Tool is the result of two years of hard work and extensive multi-stakeholder discussion involving experts from the global seafood sector. They have done this by following the reference documents at the heart of the process: the Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF), the FAO Guidelines for Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine/Inland Capture Fisheries and the FAO Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture Certification (FAO Guidelines).

Where GSSI sits in the certification landscape



Credit : GSSI 2015

The Benchmark Tool is envisaged to make the certification landscape more straightforward as schemes sign up to be benchmarked and achieve GSSI recognition. GSSI's Expert Working Groups on Fisheries, Aquaculture and Process are currently working to finalise the Tool based on feedback from a pilot test with eight schemes that participated worldwide, and a public consultation period for the seafood sector to have their say.

After its launch, GSSI's Global Benchmark Tool will be used to make information available across the seafood supply chain to drive change and lower costs. That way, producers will have more options to choose the scheme that is right for them and reduce the need for multiple audits. Seafood buyers and retailers worldwide will then have simpler, more consistent data to guide their purchasing decisions.

At the same time the Global Benchmark Tool will work towards minimising the environmental impact of how we catch, grow and deliver seafood to meet the growing global demand. Open and checked information helps promote environmental sustainability.

Building confidence in certified seafood needs widespread support. GSSI is a global initiative, being backed by 32 companies worldwide from across the seafood industry (including from harvesting, aquaculture, farming, processing, food service, retail and brand manufacturing) as Funding Partners. GSSI also counts on the support of five non-profit Affiliated Partners including FAO.

The GSSI partnership



Credit : GSSI 2015

Through our work we are reaching out to the seafood sector, including international and national certification schemes, eight of which were involved in the Tool's pilot phase:

- Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI)
- Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)
- Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA-BAP)
- Iceland Responsible Fisheries Foundation (IRFF)
- IndoGAP
- Marine Stewardship Council (MSC)
- Thai National Shrimp Standard
- VietGAP

From August 2015, together with FAO, GSSI is holding a series of regional workshops on certification in South Africa (5-6 August, Cape Town), Thailand (31 August – 1 September, Bangkok), and Chile (8-9 September, Santiago de Chile) to explain how the Tool supports sourcing decisions and the effective management of production and supply chains to producers, suppliers, government and trade bodies.

Shaping the seafood sector's future

When GSSI started three years ago, the certification landscape was a complex

and challenging one to navigate. The author has witnessed the changes firsthand, and the impact this is starting to have across the supply chain. The Global Benchmark Tool facilitates a collective, non-competitive approach to provide clarity on seafood certification and ensure consumer confidence in certified seafood.



Credit : GSSI 2015

GSSI's unique solution is being welcomed by governments and producers alike, which is reflected in VietGAP for example, signing up to be part of the Tool's pilot. GSSI views this development as being extremely motivating.

Looking ahead, GSSI is inviting seafood certification schemes to go through the benchmarking process and obtain recognition (by GSSI). By 2020, GSSI aims to have 30% of global seafood catch/production (tonnes of raw fish/shellfish per year) to be certified to a GSSI-recognised scheme.

Going forward still, GSSI is developing its post-2015 business model and future strategy, and invites new partners to join its global public-private partnership and platform. Together, all parties will have the opportunity to work together on a leading knowledge-exchange initiative and collaborate on topics that are actively shaping the seafood sector's future.

Reader enquiry number 10



Since February 2013, Herman Wisse has worked as the Program Manager for the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI). Prior to this, he developed the project proposal for the foundation of the GSSI and facilitated liaison with parties interested in becoming involved with the GSSI. He was the lead consultant for the FAO in the Evaluation Framework of the FAO Technical Guidelines for Aquaculture.

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