

future of fish

Increasing your ocean I.Q.

An interview with Mike McDermid, Ocean Wise's program director

Why are so many restaurants and retailers reluctant to commit to sourcing sustainable seafood?

Many aren't involved because it's so difficult to find and understand the information—it's too time consuming. They're busy with their jobs as it is.

How do you work with your restaurant and retail partners?

We work individually with each partner to help them make sustainable seafood purchasing decisions. We do the homework, dig through the literature, and make recommendations of what are the best options. For restaurants, all they have to do is buy the recommended fish, make changes to the menus, and the program allows them to highlight efforts they are making. For the customer, it makes it easy to identify the best seafood options on the menu.

Do consumers tend to pay more for sustainable product?

Many consumers are definitely willing to pay if you tell them the value of what they're paying for. A lot of times that's the issue.

Should restaurants go completely sustainable right away?

It doesn't make sense to require them to go 100% sustainable right away—they're a business, after all. So we suggest a time frame of continuous improvement, and they commit to removing or replacing one unsustainable item every 6 months until they either create a 100% clean menu, or they can't go any further. For some products, the industry hasn't caught up yet and there aren't sustainable options.

Why is your program so successful?

This comes from both working with industry in the past and adapting our program as we go along to make sure it's working. When I got involved, I thought there'd be a lot more trepidation and resistance from chefs. Like "who are you to tell me what to put on my menu?" Now, when they find that something's not a sustainable option, they don't even want it on their menu.

Smaller restaurants have an easier time going 100% right away. For a huge seafood chain to go 100% would be very tricky. They go through too much volume and there's no alternatives for some things. At this point there's one major chain we work with that's at about 60-65% sustainable. Some are criticizing them for that. But they started at 35%. And at the volume they're doing, that's huge change. We can't lose sight of these incremental improvements.

MIKE MCDERMID

Mike McDermid is the program manager for Ocean Wise, a conservation program of the Vancouver Aquarium, which helps restaurants, retailers, and their customers make environmentally friendly seafood choices. Seafood offerings are rated according to recommendations and research findings by leading governmental and non-governmental institutions. Best choices are then highlighted on menus by the Ocean Wise logo, which now can be found at over 300 restaurant locations, 6 market locations, 2 culinary schools, and a university campus.

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How much of your success has to do with being an aquarium?

Probably quite a bit. One thing that the aquarium is really good at, which is different from most environmental NGOs, is developing programs that work for people on a “call to action”. The aquarium is a great marketing machine.

We’re also different from the NGOs because we have two faces. The aquarium is run as a tourism business—we see a million or more visitors per year—and this is what funds our conservation program. So we understand what it’s like to run a business and what it’s like to run a conservation program.

Finally, we’re non-partisan. We’re outreach, but not activism. So this makes it a comfortable place for dialog between government, businesses, NGOs, and consumers. For some more activist environmental NGO, there’s challenge on the part of industry getting involved. Businesses don’t want to attach their name to something that could turn people off.

Is Ocean Wise also contributing to changes on the water?

Yes. The beautiful thing about the fishing market, is that whatever consumers demand, that’s what the fishermen will go out and catch. It’s very bottom-up.

For example, there’s a local seafood company here we’re working with that was looking for prawn options. So they decided to get proactive and went to Southeast Asia and started talking to local fishermen who would agree to trap-catch tiger prawns in non-sensitive areas. They actually created a fishery in Myanmar and developed a market for wild tiger prawns. It was working for a while, and now there’s embargoes because of the political situation there, but it’s an example of what we can do collaboratively.

We want to use the buying power of our group of partners and go to fishermen and tell them if you do this, we’ll buy your product and we’ll pay you more. Then the Ocean Wise logo identifies those products.

What are the main challenges you face with your program?

First, it’s a challenge that there’s no scientific measure of “sustainable”. Some groups have tried to make a quantifiable measure of sustainability, however it is very difficult to really predict what will be sustainable long-term given the large amount of unknown environmental variables. This means that sustainability always has some degree (or a large degree) of subjectivity. This also means that different groups may have very different assessments of the same fishery.

Second, there is a definite need for traceability from “boat to plate” within the seafood industry to ensure that all aspects of the seafood supply chain are held accountable and products are as they say. Because there are no labeling laws, consumers can easily be duped.

There are also challenges of scale within the industry. We’ve been talking with one major supplier who’s interested in getting involved, but they buy so much seafood that it’s going to be really hard to find enough volume to meet their needs. The majority of their pink salmon, for example, comes from an MSC fishery. To deal with seasonality, they also source from a Japanese and Russian fishery, which aren’t great choices. But within their system, they don’t have a way of separating these out, so there’s no way to give one a recommended status over another.

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Do you see the Ocean Wise brand expanding into other segments of the industry?

One of the major opportunities is a supply side program. Something that could bridge the gap between something that's as stringent as the MSC certification and no certification at all. MSC is stringent, expensive, and excludes smaller community-based fisheries. We need to bridge this gap with a program that's accessible to fishermen that are doing the right thing, but are too small or too poor to get credit for it. Such a program would involve partnerships with other organizations.

There's a huge opportunity also in the retail sector. We're contacted constantly by retailers, fishermen, producers, importers, exporters, that want to brand their product with our logo. And they're willing to pay for it.