CONSUMERS’ RESPONSE TO SUSTAINABILITY LABELING IN WILD CAUGHT FISH

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ABSTRACT

Increasing shares of fish products are sold as sustainably caught. This contribution tackles consumers’ specific knowledge on, interest in and expectations about sustainable fisheries and its products, their awareness of existing sustainability labels on fish as well as the purchase relevance of these labels in Germany. We conducted in total 12 focus groups with fish consumers in different German cities. The results show that consumers expect sustainable fisheries to avoid by-catches, overfishing and not to use dynamite. Knowledge about fisheries was mostly low and for many of the discussants this topic was new. When asked in an unprompted manner for their awareness of different labels of sustainably caught wild fish, the label of the Marine Stewardship Council was the only one known by some of the participants. It turned out that participants were skeptical about food labeling and standard setting in general. Accordingly, many participants stated not to look for sustainability labels when purchasing fish products. In order to tackle with consumers’ limited knowledge of fish and low interest in additional information, communication of sustainability in fisheries should be short, simple and reliable. Sustainability standards which clearly differentiate from non-certified fisheries are required.

Key words: consumer behaviour, consumer attitudes, sustainable fisheries

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1 Introduction

The worldwide increasing demand for fish is frequently associated with negative impacts on the environment. Impacts of sea fisheries can be overfishing, discards and the undesired effects on natural sea ecosystems. Several studies from different countries indicate that also consumers have realised these problems and ask for sustainably caught wild fish, some of them even exhibiting an increased willingness to pay (Roheim et al., 2011; Jaffry et al., 2004; Verbeke et al., 2007).

Labeling is at the centre of consumers’ buying decision for sustainably produced fish, as consumers need a clear and credible indication (Jahn et al. 2005). Labels can be names, brands, marks, logos etc. The aim of logos or labels on product packages is to provide information to consumers with the aim to influence consumers’ buying behaviour (Hamm, 1991). The benefit of labels for consumers consists in the alleviation in the buying situation and in reducing the risk of making a wrong buying decision (Hamm, 1991). Labels enable repetitive purchase by facilitating recognition.

Against the background of the frequently overwhelming amount of available information and stimulus satiation of many consumers it is crucial to address consumers in a well-targeted manner. Therefore, information given to consumers should be carefully selected – it should enable them to clearly distinguish one product from competing offers. In this context, labels serve as search criteria which reduce quality insecurity and search costs. Precondition is that the information given is perceived to be credible by consumers. In order to support consumers in their decision making by decreasing information costs and increasing their certitude to make a ‘correct’ decision which is in line with consumers’ individual preferences, labeling needs to be unambiguous and easily understandable (Thøgersen et al., 2009).

Labels are particularly important for the communication of product characteristics which consumers cannot verify neither before nor after shopping. These properties are so-called credence attributes and production methods such as fishing methods or catch areas being typical examples. The concept is that consumers deduct from the extrinsic attributes, the labels, on the intrinsic attributes, in this case sustainable fishing methods. Credibility is a crucial attribute of the logos. In any case, effective labeling requires that needs to be noticed, understood and positively assessed in order to fulfil its allocative function.

In Germany there exist a large number of different logos indicating different sustainable fishing practices on fish packages. Various authors stressed that this multitude of labels (not only in fish products) might cause uncertainty rather than improve knowledge and increase the quality of decision making. This applies particularly when consumers’ knowledge is low (Lasner and Hamm, 2010; Parkes et al., 2010).

Against this background, aim of this research was to analyse consumers’ knowledge of and attitudes towards sustainable fisheries and towards the existent sustainability labels. Do
existing labels fulfill their role of supporting consumers in their buying decisions? And how can labeling and communication be improved in order to better support consumers in the buying decisions?

2 Methodological approach

For this research we employed the explorative qualitative approach of focus groups. The particular strength of focus groups lays in the interaction between participants. These interactions allow participants to deeper reflect on their opinions than in case of individual interviews. That is why focus groups are well suitable to monitor the variety of opinions and attitudes of people (e.g. Lamnek, 2005; Finch and Lewis, 2003).

Between April and Mai 2012 in total 12 focus groups with 6 to 12 fish consumers each, were conducted in 4 German cities (Hamburg, Leipzig, Stuttgart and Munich). The discussions within the focus groups were structured by means of a guideline and included buying criteria for fish, knowledge of sustainable fisheries as well as on awareness, perception (including credibility) and purchase relevance of sustainability logos which can be found in the market place (Figure 1). Additionally, expectations and ideas of consumers with regard to improving the communication of sustainable fisheries were discussed. All discussions were audio and video recorded, verbatim transcribed and thematically coded.

Figure 1: Sustainability labels for wild caught fish in German supermarkets
3 Results

Important purchase criteria with fish were taste and designated use, freshness and quality as well as price. Some discussants preferred fresh fish because of better taste, others favoured frozen fish because they assumed it to be fresher. The role of the price varied: some discussants doubted the quality of low priced fish and supposed higher prices to be indicators of higher quality. Others preferred low priced fish. Sustainable fisheries practices also were repeatedly mentioned as purchase criteria. Indications of origin were only later referred to.

When asked for their understanding of sustainable fisheries, discussants named avoidance of discards, of overfishing, the usage of large trawl nets with sufficient opening of mesh, and no use of dynamite or poison. Protection of endangered fish species and the use of fishing techniques which do not damage sea soils were other aspects of sustainability mentioned in the focus groups. Some of the participants stated that they felt that the term ‘sustainability’ was overused. It was feared ‘sustainability’ would be also used to describe processes and products which are not sustainable at all. Not all discussants knew about sustainability issues in fisheries and ‘I have no idea with regard to sustainable fisheries’ was a comment made several times.

The unaided question for logos indicating sustainable fisheries on fish packages, exhibited that awareness is generally low. The MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) label was the only one known by some participants when asked in an unprompted manner. Other comments were ‘there is a small blue logo’. In one of the discussion rounds also the label of the WWF was mentioned. Subsequently, the discussants were confronted with 5 logos which can be found on fish packages in German supermarkets (Figure 1). The MSC-label was the logo best known amongst the participants, followed by the organic Naturland Wildfisch label. Most participants knew the Naturland label from other organic food.

The MSC label was assessed to be pleasing ‘I think this logo with the check mark which is turning into a fish is a really nice image with a high recognition value’. But, there were also other participants who associated it with a motor sport club or a shipping company which used the same acronym. Others were reminded by the term ‘marine’ of military issues (‘frigate’). Some participants mentioned with respect to the MSC label ‘I can eat fish with quiet conscience, because there will be fish even after me having eaten some of it’, and ‘they are cooperating only with specific fisheries who do not overfish, who catch cautiously and do not cause more distress than is really necessary to the fish.’

The judgment of the credibility of the labels differed. While a large part of the discussants perceived the MSC label to be credible, there were also some participants who doubted the credibility mainly because of its large dispersion on frozen fish packages ‘You can see it so frequently so I ask myself, whether really all deserve it’. Others regarded the large dispersion
as indication of its credibility. ‘You can see it so often, so it has to be good, otherwise you would not see it so frequently’.

Purchase relevance follows immediately from the credibility of the MSC label. Again, opinions differed. Some stated that they look for this label when buying fish products ‘I think you can buy these products without any problems, without having bad conscious’. However, it was not possible to deduct any additional willingness to pay for MSC labeled products. Nevertheless, many participants argued that they would prefer products with logo over those without logo.

The Naturland Wildfisch label was also known by many consumers. However, most of them associated it with organic food, but not with wild caught fish. Participants were surprised and confused about the add-on ‘Wildfisch’. Generally, the Naturland label was associated with meat or with cereals - both agricultural products ‘The other logo, the Naturland logo, doesn’t say anything about the topic’. Other participants perceived the term ‘Wildfisch’ in contrast to the more intensive aquacultural production. Also higher prices were linked with the Naturland label.

Participants’ uncertainty about this label negatively impacted on its credibility with regard to sustainable fisheries. However, it became clear that consumers trusted in this label as a label for organic production. Obviously, mainly consumers of organic food perceived it as trustful logo for sustainable fish. Accordingly, it seemed to be relevant for purchasing in this consumer group.

Also the Dolphin Safe label was known by some participants. However, most of the participants had difficulties in interpreting its message ‘… something is being saved … whales or dolphins’. Some associated the logo with toys ‘I have to think all the time about toys’. Compared to the fact that this label exists already since 1990 this result comes as a surprise – it might be caused by the fact that this label is only used on tuna cans and was never promoted. Participants missed any additional information, such as some text or an internet link. They assessed the label as not self-explaining or meaningful ‘There is information missing. It is too simple’. Consequently, credibility and purchase relevance were low.

The two other labels under investigation, Friend of the sea (FOS) and Iceland Responsible Fisheries (IRF) were unknown to the discussants. The FOS was perceived to be unsuitable as indicator of sustainable fisheries. It was associated with fashion, with clothing for sailors or with sailing clubs. Accordingly, credibility and purchase relevance was low. In contrast, the IRF logo was judged as being quite appealing. Test persons associated a swarm with it, and although there is no explanation given for the term ‘responsible fisheries’, some of the participants related it with sustainable fisheries. These participants judged the logo to be credible and purchase relevant. Generally, the use of English expressions on the packages was disliked. The terms should be intelligible to all and therefore the German language was preferred.
The discussions also revealed that the standards underlying the logos were generally unknown, even for the better known MSC label.

4 Conclusions

Our study shows that sustainability issues of wild caught fish are of minor relevance for German consumers at the point of sale and that consumers’ sensitivity with regard to fisheries is low. Many consumers seemed start looking into the subject only during the discussions within the focus groups.

Only the MSC label was known to a larger share of the discussants; however, it was mostly known by aided questioning. The real relevance of this logo for consumers’ buying decisions is difficult to assess. Nevertheless, results indicate that MSC products often are chosen because they comply with other appreciated fish characteristics and not because of having been caught sustainably.

Because of the limited knowledge on sustainability labels for fish, they can only partly fulfill their role of providing information and to support consumers in their buying decisions. Additionally, a weariness facing the large number of existent logos became evident. This weariness or resignation refers to the flood of information in general as well as to the large number of existing (food) labels and their credibility.

Specific challenges for the fisheries sector when thinking about how to communicate with consumers is their limited knowledge on fish products. The sector needs to accept consumers’ often limited interest in looking for and processing additional information. Sustainability standards which clearly differentiate from ‘normal’ fisheries are necessary. The fish industry should care for a joint labeling of sustainability in fisheries. Easily understandable communication in the internet and short and simple messages on packages supported by a catchy label in national language should be provided in order to increase consumers’ response to sustainable fisheries.

The results of this explorative study are based on focus groups with about 100 participants. These participants are not representative for German consumers in general. Further research should aim at quantifying these results by means of a quantitative survey explaining consumers’ buying behavior in fish and extending on consumers’ willingness to pay.

References


