

Fishy Labels

Are Aquaculture Ecolabels Up to Snuff?

Danilo Cedrone/UNFAO

In recent years, you may have noticed a new addition to your neighborhood seafood counters: some fish are labeled. Analogous to labels for 'fair trade' coffee or organic produce, these labels certify that the fish was produced under certain conditions. As a consumer, you expect an aquaculture label to indicate that a fish was produced in an environmentally, socially, and economically sustainable fashion. Unfortunately, there are more than 25 aquaculture labels in use around the world, and each of them has established its own criteria for what it takes to become certified. As a result, you may see different labels from store to store and even within a single store, and these labels may or may not actually indicate that your fish was sustainably produced! Confused yet? We'll help you sort out which labels are 'greenwashing' and which aren't.

Wait, what's an ecolabel?

Ecolabeling is a simple idea that has been implemented in industries ranging from coffee to timber. Ecolabels empower consumers to use their purchasing power to support producers who implement sustainable practices. Ecolabels create standards that producers must meet to become certified. These standards cover a range of topics, such as pollution limits, protection for workers' rights, and ensuring community access to land. Producers who meet these standards can seek certification; if they pass inspection, certified producers can add the ecolabel's mark to their products. The mark indicates that a product the product meets the standards set by the ecolabel and indicates to you, the consumer, that the product is sustainable. In addition, stores may require that their merchandise be certified, allowing certified producers to benefit from increased access to markets.

Why do we need aquaculture ecolabels, anyway?

Aquaculture has a lot of promise for reducing pressure on depleted wild fish stocks, providing a source income in developing economies, and serving as an important protein source in undernourished regions. But some current aquaculture production practices cause serious environmental and social impacts, such as:

- Use of fish meal and fish oil from overfished wild stocks
- Creation of protein deficits in developing world due to export of fish for meal and oil
- Production of waste from fecal matter and excess food
- Escape of nonnative species and domestic breeds that interfere with native species
- Transmission of diseases and use of prophylactic antibiotics and parasiticides
- Animal welfare concerns due to overcrowding and growth in suboptimal conditions
- Reduction of freshwater resources, including salinization of aquifers
- Destruction of coastal habitats, such as mangroves
- Interference with historical use of land and water by local communities
- Lack of consideration for worker's or women's rights

If properly designed, ecolabels can address all of these issues.

How can I tell whether an ecolabel is adequately addressing these impacts?

Different species, locations, and production processes produce different impacts. For example, tuna farming requires much more fish meal and fish oil than does tilapia production, and facilities that treat and re-circulate waste water release less waste than net pens. Ecolabels address these differences in different ways – some certify all sorts of farms and species as long as they comply with “best management practices”, while others certify only species and production methods that meet a certain baseline of environmental and social performance – that is, only those that are sustainable. Of course, it’s difficult for consumers to tell the difference.

Why do ecolabels differ so much?

Each ecolabel has to address four basic elements when deciding how to address the complicated questions of which producers and species should be certified. Different decisions about what ecolabels address, how they are governed and set their standards, and how they implement their systems all have important implications for the end results – both for consumers and for local communities.

- **Scope:** Scoping documents establish the goals for which the label is created so that stakeholders and designers develop a shared understanding of the relevant impacts the ecolabel will seek to avoid and the benchmarks to determine ecolabel success.
- **Governance structure:** Ecolabels are implemented by bodies ranging from a board of directors to dispute resolution panels. Effective ecolabels ensure that the structure of and procedures used by these bodies are credible, ensuring participatory, transparent, and accountable systems that incorporate the views of all stakeholders.
- **Standards:** Standards are the heart of any ecolabel. Credible, standards are developed through written procedures and provide objective measures of compliance that can be directly applied during certification.
- **Implementation:** Certification bodies apply ecolabel standards by evaluating producers for compliance. Ecolabels rely on certifiers to implement their systems fairly and must ensure adequate participation, transparency, and accountability mechanisms to ensure that the worthy producers are certified and others are excluded.

How can I tell if an ecolabel is right for me?

Two nonpartisan organizations, the Environmental Law Institute and The Ocean Foundation, created recommendations for how to design and operate aquaculture ecolabels in a credible and effective way.

To learn more about these recommendations, including evaluations of existing ecolabels, visit the aquaculture certification information hub at:

www.eli.org/program_areas/ocean_aquaculture.cfm.



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