



STOP ILLEGAL FISHING CASE STUDY SERIES **03**

February 2011

Sustainable Seafood

PROMOTING CHANGE IN THE SOUTH AFRICAN
SEAFOOD CHAIN

Background

In tackling illegal fishing and overexploitation of fish stocks, and the consequent environmental and social impacts, a commendable effort has been made through the South African World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) Sustainable Fisheries Programme. This Programme uses two approaches: firstly it works together with the industry to reduce the impacts of destructive fishing practices, and secondly, it increases awareness amongst seafood suppliers/retailers, restaurants and consumers to empower them to make the 'right' choices for seafood sustainability.

Through increasing awareness of sustainability issues, the latter initiative – the Southern African Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI) – focuses on addressing the demands and incentives along the seafood chain. As fish stocks continue to dwindle, and with seafood becoming increasingly popular at restaurants around the world, 'sustainable choices' will undoubtedly only become more important.

In order to implement SASSI, a range of partners have come together to put in place schemes to assist the different players of the seafood chain in making more 'sustainable choices'.

The **SASSI Retailer and Supplier Scheme** aims to shift demand away from over-exploited fish stocks towards more sustainable choices and to encourage voluntary compliance with the South African Marine Living Resources Act (MLRA) amongst seafood traders. This is done by supporting participants in: updating and improving their seafood procurement policies, improving their seafood labelling, implementing training for their staff and communicating their commitment to sustainability to their staff and customers. The scheme now has twelve participants with one more about to join. The basic form of engagement is through a series of detailed assessments, in which the participant's current operations are assessed and scored, risks are identified and actions proposed to help improve the participant's current sustainability score¹.

The **SASSI Restaurant Programme** primarily focuses on providing training and SASSI awareness materials as well as promoting participating restaurants on the SASSI website. In return, participants make certain basic commitments towards sustainable seafood and pay an annual membership fee. There are now 187 restaurants officially registered with the scheme.

STOP ILLEGAL FISHING CASE STUDIES aim to:

Define best practice by analysing practical examples of different approaches in the fight against IUU fishing. They also demonstrate the magnitude of activities and partnerships underway to stop illegal fishing and provide the basis for policy advice.





The Story (cont'd)

The **SASSI Consumer Awareness Campaign** features a range of activities, but among the key is the traffic light system² (green, orange and red listings of species) created to help determine the relative sustainability of a species, based on an evaluation of the species stock status, the impact the fishery or farming practise has on the environment and how well that species' stock is managed within the area of capture³. A website containing a seafood database and downloadables (e.g. the

SASSI Consumer Pocket Guide and the SASSI Conscious Seafood Diner Card), a SASSI mobi site, Twitter and Facebook sites, and a FishMS⁴ service, have all been set up to help consumers make better seafood choices. The original SASSI Consumer Pocket Guide has now been revised, using an internationally accepted best practice methodology⁵, to include important imported species and aquaculture species⁶ but also taking into account the fishing method.

Key features & outcomes

- The **initial collaboration of the partner organisations** involved in SASSI was instrumental in its solid establishment and continued cooperation. These partners are also vital for SASSI to reach into urban areas and coastal provinces all over South Africa.
- Being provided with **information through easy-to-use tools**, South African consumers are becoming more aware⁷ and increasingly want to make the right choices with regard to legality and sustainability of the seafood they consume, thus increasing the demand for sustainable products.
- Using an **internationally accepted and scientifically rigorous methodology for determining listings of fish species** is critical for on-going credibility and buy-in – this methodology allows for a transparent process where interested and affected parties can check the status of a species in order to understand how and why a species has been scored a certain way.
- **Taking it to the next level** – a number of SASSI supporters have moved beyond the general call for action by, for example, challenging the local supermarket to stop selling red-listed species and restaurants running a SASSI green-list platter special, which also raised funds for SASSI, or removing all orange-listed seafood species from their menu within the first week of joining⁸.

Lessons learned

- **Hold participants to their commitments** – timelines should be drawn up within which participants are expected to meet their own sustainable seafood commitments. Failure in doing so should result in participants being removed from the programme/scheme. Commitments should be clearly communicated internally and externally to increase transparency and accountability.
- **Assess progress** – all participants wishing to renew their annual membership of the restaurant programme are now required to submit an evaluation form, while new participants are also required to fill in these evaluations to provide a baseline against which they can be evaluated again after one year of membership.
- **Ensure traceability back to a sustainable source** – in order to make any statements about the sustainability and legality of any seafood products, it is critical that the product is traceable back to a sustainable source. Ideally, any traceability system in place should be independently audited to verify its reliability.
- **Ensure appropriate labelling** to support traceability and facilitating informed choices by buyers and consumers.
- **Encourage building capacity to provide in-house training on sustainability issues**, e.g. by appointing a 'sustainability officer' to ensure that such training becomes a core part of staff training, thus avoiding reliance on SASSI in cases of high staff turnover.

Drivers

The need for SASSI was made clear through a 2002 survey of seafood restaurants and retailers trading in linefish in the Kwazulu-Natal province, showing that there was a high level of ignorance among these groups concerning marine conservation issues in general, as well as of the relevant sections of the MLRA. Ninety two percent of the retailers contravened at least one aspect of the MLRA – mostly by buying from recreational fishers and offering fish for sale. However, it also became clear that for retailers/suppliers and restaurants to move towards more sustainable/legal choices, they needed an incentive in the shape of educated consumers.

Challenges

The overarching challenge is the risk of 'greenwashing', i.e. the misconception that the use of the SASSI logo and membership of the supplier/retailer scheme or the restaurant programme constitute an endorsement of the participants' 'sustainability levels'. However, SASSI is not an eco-labelling organisation – the primary use of the SASSI logo and the individual fish emblems should be for communicating information related to seafood sustainability to consumers and not as a promotional aid. Thus, taking the steps noted under *Lessons learned* would help to reduce the risk of greenwashing. Some related and more specific challenges include:

- **'The administrative burden'** – many participants appear reluctant to submit properly completed evaluation forms and contracts although these are key in assessing progress and determining commitment levels – e.g. while there is no doubt that the restaurant participation scheme has helped to increase awareness of both the restaurants' suppliers and consumers, the challenge remains to evaluate whether the restaurants themselves have actually implemented positive changes⁹ to their businesses as a result of working with SASSI.
- **Procurement guidelines containing sustainability aspects** – there is a problem in participants simply adopting SASSI's generic procurement guidelines but not actually reviewing their products against them. To review their product range, participants need to be insisting that their own suppliers provide them with more information about their products. Although they may have made certain procurement decisions because of their SASSI participation, most participants appear to still procure seafood in much the same way as they did prior to joining SASSI¹⁰.
- **Ensuring traceability** – all participants have a basic level of traceability in that they have valid invoices from their suppliers, which make them legally compliant under the current regulations, but few have provided consolidated and up-to-date lists of all their traded seafood products.
- **Labelling** – almost all participants are underperforming in this aspect¹¹. However, most of the time the required information is known although it is not included on the packaging, either because it is not a legal requirement or because of the cost.

Players involved

SASSI is now managed by **WWF South Africa** but a range of partners – apart from retailers/suppliers, restaurants and consumers – have been involved since the creation of the initiative, including:

- **TRAFFIC:** provides information on seafood trade dynamics within South Africa.
- **The Department of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (DAFF):** supplies scientific data that help determine SASSI's Species List and is involved in the listing process.
- South Africa's largest marine aquariums (**uShaka Sea World in Durban, Bayworld in Port Elizabeth, and Two Oceans Aquarium in Cape Town**) and the **Johannesburg Zoo:** assist in promotion of the initiative to the general public.
- Other supporting partners include **Endangered Wildlife Trust; Sharklife; the Southern African Foundation for the Conservation of Coastal Birds;** and the **South African Institute for Aquatic Biodiversity:** all have contributed to awareness-raising.

Policy implications

- Creating initiatives that better interlink players along the seafood chain, to create incentives for sustainable and legal seafood trading choices, should be promoted as a cost-effective means to improve fisheries governance.
- Setting up a solid system of traceability and labelling needs to be underpinned by an adequate¹² regulatory framework. Compliance with such regulations will be encouraged by increased knowledge among customers.
- Establishing species lists to cover regionally traded species as well as establishing regional traceability/labelling systems to promote wider use of such sustainability schemes would require but also foster regional cooperation in relation to sustainable/legal fisheries.

Next steps

Some of the planned steps to strengthen the impact of SASSI include:

- **Completing one new species assessment every month.** Additionally, the expert review panel will convene annually to ensure consistency and accuracy across assessments.
- **Undertaking regular consumer surveys** to get an indication of the effectiveness of the SASSI communication activities.
- **Developing a voluntary business standard** against which retailers/seafood suppliers could be assessed in order to address the market need for endorsement and to address the issue of greenwashing.
- **Developing a smart phone application for the SASSI seafood list.**
- **Developing fisheries improvement projects** which more directly translate consumer pressure on retailers into changed behaviour at sea.

Acknowledgements

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Further Information



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Footnotes

- ¹ Areas that are assessed include: the seafood policy (in place or not, content, etc.); procurement guidelines (in place or not, content, etc.); traceability; labelling; training; and communication.
- ² The green-listed fish species are fish which come from relatively healthy and well-managed populations that are able to cope with the current fishing pressure; the orange-listed fish species have associated reasons for concern, either because of their poor stock status, worrying population trends, or because of other negative environmental issues associated with the fishery that the species is caught in; and the red-listed fish species are unsustainably caught species as well as those that are illegal to sell in South Africa, according to the MLRA.
- ³ All species illegal for sale are automatically placed on the SASSI red list.
- ⁴ Apart from a few spikes in usage after particular publicity events, the number of daily requests to FishMS has remained fairly constant. As of May 2010, the FishMS service had received 88 520 requests.
- ⁵ The 'Common Methodology', developed by a number of international organisations and considered the best practice for seafood pocket cards.
- ⁶ Due to the growing South African aquaculture industry, this was becoming an increasingly pressing need.
- ⁷ It has been shown that 33% of South Africans have a good understanding about issues of bycatch and sustainability, and care about sustainable seafood issues; however, 60% of South Africans maintain that it is the retailer's responsibility to stock sustainable seafood; and 70% of South Africans agree that health takes precedence over issues of environmental friendliness and sustainability.
- ⁸ Restaurants that only serve SASSI green listed species are called 'SASSI Champions'.
- ⁹ Sadly, not one participant is providing customers with the level of information required by the SASSI Charter – most are only providing customers with common names on their menus.
- ¹⁰ E.g. smaller participants are concerned that they cannot afford to stick to rigid guidelines and are not in a position to dictate to their (often much bigger) suppliers what they should supply them with.
- ¹¹ Smaller suppliers are often reluctant due to the increased cost and some participants simply do not have control over the product packaging and labels and are therefore restricted to the information supplied.
- ¹² Problems with the current South African regulatory framework include: lack of DNA testing; lack of a standardised list of common and scientific names; and the limited requirements of proof of legality/traceability.



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