

Certification of aquaculture: One of the strategies to sustainable seafood production

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Certification of products from aquatic farming - aquaculture – is contributing to sustainable production, but it also has serious limits. Therefore it should be seen as one approach among many for steering aquaculture toward sustainability. This is argued by an international team of researchers in a paper published in *Science* on September 6, 2013.

Aquaculture is one of the fastest growing [global food production](#) systems, and now contributes around 13% of world animal-protein supply. It provides almost half of the world's supply of seafood. The rapid expansion of the sector has come with a wide range of concerns about the environmental and [social impact](#) of [aquaculture](#). In response, NGO-led certification schemes, such as the Dutch based Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), have developed standards against which the environmental and social performance of aquaculture can be measured.

Based on the work of an international network of researchers, the paper argues that aquaculture certification has limits as a means of governing sustainable production. Aquaculture certification is limited in the volume of global production it can certify, given market demand for certified seafood is currently limited to the US and EU while the majority of [seafood consumption](#) occurs in other markets. The impact of certification is also limited in reaching wider sustainability goals, it is focused on the farm-level instead of the cumulative impacts of multiple farms in one location on the surrounding environment or farming communities. Furthermore it is limited in its ability to include stakeholders, particularly smallholder producers, in the Global South

where the vast majority of [global production](#) comes from.

The implication of these limits is that certification needs to be seen as but one of a wider array of strategies for regulating sustainable production. Assumptions that countries in the Global South are unwilling or incapable to regulate aquaculture no longer holds true everywhere. Many of these countries have experience with international food safety regulation and represent some of the most important domestic markets for aquaculture products globally. Certification should therefore be seen as part of a broader array of governance approaches for promoting sustainable aquaculture production. Global certification also needs to better complement national level sustainability programmes. Further research is needed to determine what kind of hybrid forms of environmental governance can be developed that move beyond an overemphasis on certification, and instead draw on the strength of states, the private sector and institutions such as the ASC.

Certification volume

Only a 4.6% of the global aquaculture production is currently certified. The 13 main species currently covered by the ASC currently account for 41.6% of the worldwide aquaculture production, leaving 58.4% of aquaculture production with no opportunity for certification. The recent introduction of two additional certification labels for multispecies standards has expanded the potentially certifiable volume to 73.5%. In practice, however, the new standards will only lead to an increase of 0.1% in certified volume because much of what is potentially certifiable is produced in countries like China with little demand for [sustainability certification](#).

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