

Like eating fish? It's time to start caring where it comes from

October 30 2014, by Carissa Klein



How do you know if your fish supper is sustainable? Credit: Mw12310/Wikimedia Commons, CC BY-SA

Australians love seafood. Whether it's fish and chips by the seaside or prawns on the barbie at Christmas, it's integral to many of our traditions and social gatherings. Yet very little of the seafood we consume is sustainable. For a country that has such a love affair with the ocean, I find this perplexing.

The health of the world's oceans and its fisheries are in decline, and this applies to one of Australia's most precious icons, the Great Barrier Reef. Although there a range of actions required to reverse this decline, one simple thing that anyone can do is stop eating unsustainable [seafood](#).

But why isn't this already happening? There's a lack of awareness and action, as will hopefully be highlighted by the new SBS documentary series [What's the Catch?](#). The good news is that there are simple things we can do about this problem.

Sustainable seafood can be defined in various ways, but as Australia's [Sustainable Seafood Guide](#) (and its counterparts around the world) makes clear, sustainability is not only about the status of individual species stocks, but the impact of fishing on our oceans, which includes the broader effects of fishing on habitats and ecosystems.

Three key steps to sustainability

Here are three key things that are needed to shift Australia's love for seafood from unsustainable to sustainable.

1. Leadership from the marine conservation community

As a marine conservation scientist, I'm continuously struck by the prevalence of unsustainable and/or unlabelled seafood at science and conservation meetings and social gatherings.

This observation prompted me and some colleagues to assess the sustainability of seafood served at seven marine ecology and conservation meetings held in Australia (attended by over 4000 people from around the world). To score them, we used a [publicly available](#)

[guide](#) which considers population stock status and the impact of fishing or aquaculture method.

[Our results](#) showed that seafood was served at all the meetings, and at more than half of the meetings at least one unsustainable species was on offer. Only about a third of the meetings offered a sustainable choice. If marine conservationists struggle to eat [sustainable seafood](#) at their own meetings, what hope is there for everyone else?

Marine scientists and conservationists urgently need to turn science into action, and to lead by personal example.

2. Easily accessible sustainable seafood

As a consumer of seafood, I want sustainable options. However, I usually find that the average fish and chip shop or restaurant has few (sometimes no) sustainable options on the menu.

There are restaurants that specialize in sourcing sustainable seafood (such as [Swamp Dog](#) in Brisbane); a great initiative but all too rare. What we need is to be able to head to the local fish and chip shop, perhaps after a day at the beach, and reliably find sustainable choices.

And as much as we need easy access to sustainable seafood, we also need there to be no access to clearly unsustainable seafood. For example, it's common to see Orange Roughy on menus, despite it listed widely as an unsustainable choice and even listed as "[conservation dependent](#)" under Australia's Environmental Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act.

Another problem with sourcing sustainable seafood is inconsistency in seafood guides. Fish that your local supermarket claims is sustainable may not be labelled as such in other guides. Who do you trust? I usually end up walking away empty-handed, but who can blame shoppers for

going ahead and buying it anyway if they're told it's a responsible choice?

In some ways, the problem is similar to the difficulty of finding a range of organic vegetables at the local fruit and veg shop or supermarket. One way that this has been addressed in agriculture is through "fruit and veg box" schemes, in which you choose a provider you trust to supply you with sustainably grown (organic and local) vegetables.

Similar schemes for seafood, such as [this one in Santa Barbara, California](#), are still rare. There's no doubt that a project like this would help consumers in Australia eat more sustainable seafood.

3. Stronger labelling laws

Unlike in Europe, Australia's seafood labelling laws are weak. When you order cooked seafood, you can't be sure of where it is coming from (Australia or overseas) or what species you are eating, despite what the vendor tells you.

You may have thought your last order of barramundi was a good choice – either sustainably farmed or locally caught. But more than two-thirds of the barramundi consumed in Australia [is imported](#).

If we can't rely on labels in fish and chip shops or restaurants, how can we choose sustainable options? This is the focus of the [Label My Fish](#) and of the new SBS series.

Australia is viewed as a global leader in [marine conservation](#) by many other countries, primarily due to the rezoning of the Great Barrier Reef Marine Park in 2004, which set aside 33% of its area as no-take zones. This reputation is now at stake.

To be a true leader, Australians will need to make some serious

modifications to the seafood market to ensure that it is more sustainable. As stated by the Centre for Policy Development's [recent report](#) on fisheries management, "Australia could be a leader in sustainable seafood production".

But first we have to care what's on our plate.

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