

Aquaculture Stewardship Council

The future of food production will depend heavily on attaining a responsible aquaculture that treats human and environmental health with equal care. Chris Ninnes, CEO of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council, explains the benefits of non-governmental certification in the sector



What role will aquaculture play in the future of food production? How can negative environmental impacts be minimised?

Aquaculture is currently the fastest growing food production system in the world. However, as the sector expands so does its footprint on the environment and society. Customers buying fish increasingly demand to know whether the seafood they buy and eat is harmful to the environment or local communities. Voluntary certification schemes help the best performers distinguish themselves from the average, and programmes such as the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)'s recognise and promote the sale of certified farmed fish through the use of an on-pack logo. This creates incentives for other producers to make the changes necessary to achieve the ASC standard.

As the demand for seafood grows, so too does the pressure on producers to reduce their environmental and social impacts. We can therefore make a difference by using market forces to transform aquaculture by reducing the key negative social and environmental impacts of aquaculture through compliance with ASC's standards at farm level. We are not alone in seeking these transformations: many NGOs, industry associations, other certification programmes and governments are all committed to the same outcome. ASC is an additional tool to help with this work.

Could you outline the ASC's main goals? What are your central focus areas at present?

ASC strives to become the leading aquaculture standard, defining the most stringent environmental and social criteria for responsible aquaculture production. We want to be a market leader in promoting best practice in the aquaculture industry to improve the environmental and social footprint of the sector. It is also important to develop a broader awareness of the negative impacts that ASC strives to reduce.

In essence, our goal is to establish an undisputed track record of positive environmental and social impact of certified farms, and an unquestioned reputation for independence and credibility.

To achieve our vision we need to provide value for more farmers, in more markets. We must have relevance within middle income and emerging markets in order to improve the overall global standard of aquaculture. There are great opportunities to work in these new markets: fish and shellfish farming and consumption is expanding fast; there is a rapidly growing middle class increasingly concerned about food safety, provenance and the environment; and the development and consolidation of the retail and food service sector brings increasing opportunities for market-based programmes like ASC. We have already started working with China Aquatic Products Processing and Marketing Alliance (CAPPMA) and WWF in China on a project – Greening the Supply of Chinese Tilapia – to help aquaculture in China become more responsible. We also have staff in Brazil working with retail and food sectors to adopt ASC. They are engaging with local farms to encourage certification. The 2016 Olympics in Brazil will heavily promote seafood sustainability and local provenance and we want to use this opportunity as a springboard for ASC in the region.

It is also important for us to add value to the producers by more effectively linking production with the market. For example, we

are running a 'certified seafood' promotional week called Think Fish across The Netherlands with the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and WWF to raise consumer awareness about the benefits of choosing sustainable seafood. We hope that this will be rolled out across other markets.

Why is the correct labelling of seafood so vital to responsible aquaculture?

The ASC on-pack logo for responsible aquaculture demonstrates to buyers and consumers that their product comes from farms that use responsible methods that minimise the footprint on the environment and society. Products from certified farms are only allowed to use the ASC logo if they have met rigorous environmental and social criteria. This is a great opportunity for farming operations to demonstrate their social and environmental responsibility and these are values that the market is increasingly demanding.

How does the ASC use market forces to transform aquaculture?

As a market-based programme, ASC is designed to create incentives to reward responsible farming practices. The certification programme promotes and rewards responsible fish farming when it influences the choices people make when buying seafood. It is through the use of the consumer-facing logo that purchasing decisions are reinforced. When a buyer chooses to purchase ASC-certified fish, certified farms are rewarded for their responsible practices. ASC and its partners encourage processors, suppliers, retailers and consumers to give priority to purchasing seafood from ASC-certified farms and to demonstrate this through their use of the ASC logo.

As markets and consumers increasingly demand seafood that can demonstrate reduced environmental and social impact, market incentives are created that increasingly encourage producers to seek ASC certification. Many of these farms are likely to have made significant improvements in their operations to do so, resulting in requisite benefits to all concerned.

The ASC has appointed the independent accreditation body, Accreditation Services International (ASI). Why is an independent and impartial accreditation body important to maintaining ASC's standards?

ASC is run as a third-party programme to ensure that we maintain credibility and independence. This means that ASC itself does not assess farms; certificates are issued by independent certification bodies that have been independently accredited by ASI.

By working with a single international accreditation organisation, as opposed to a range of national organisations, we can best guarantee the quality of our programme. A crucial element of credibility is consistency; for example, ensuring that the same requirements and performance evaluations are applied for all certifiers wishing to become accredited for auditing against the ASC standards. Having an independent company maintain consistent and credible 'policing' of accredited certifiers ensures ASC is not engaged in this operational area, removing any potential for a conflict of interest.

How many different species does ASC protect? Are there different standards for each species? Do some species need more protection than others?

In total, eight standards covering 12 species groups have been developed by the Aquaculture Dialogues. Six standards – for abalone, bivalves, freshwater trout, pangasius, tilapia and salmon – have already been finalised. ASC standard for shrimp is expected to be launched into the market by the end of 2013. *Seriola/cobia* will follow in early 2014.

The 12 species groups were chosen because of their potential impact on the environment and society, their market value and the extent to which they are traded internationally or their potential for such trade.

Why are requirements for ASC Group Certification now being adjusted?

As the majority of aquaculture globally is carried out by small- to medium-sized operations, it is important to ensure ASC's set up offers possibilities for these farms to adopt the ASC standards' requirements. Group certification will help this. It will ensure the programme is accessible to small-scale producers and it can also provide efficiencies for larger organisations that meet the criteria.

An initial first draft methodology is available, which has drawn on the existing best practice of group certification approaches within and outside the sector. When completed, it will become a key component of ASC certification programme for responsible fish farming. Group certification will enable ASC to operate as an inclusive programme, ensuring that certification is attainable for a broad range of producers, including valuable opportunities for small-scale operations to become certified.

Could you expand on the ASC Responsible Feed Project? How will this project tackle problems relating to the key ingredients used in making feed?

The main aim of the project is to create a new, globally applicable, ASC Feed Standard. The standard will set requirements for the aquaculture feed industry to be run on a more environmentally and socially responsible basis. For example, tracing key ingredients used in fish feed and making sure raw material manufacturers demonstrate that their products are produced responsibly. I believe this approach is optimal for improving the environmental performance of the feed component of fish farming and developing a cohesive and consistent tool on behalf of the broader aquaculture industry. The standard is expected to be completed by the end of 2015.

Importantly, this standard will have wider applicability for other certification programmes. In April of this year, ASC signed a memorandum of understanding with both the Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) and GlobalGAP. This outlined a number of areas where collaborative work would be beneficial for the industry. A key theme is to create audit efficiencies and reduce the costs of certification. Both GAA and GlobalGAP are committed to working with us on the Feed Standard with the intention to develop a common framework

that we can all adopt, albeit not necessarily with the same level of performance requirements.

As a not-for-profit organisation, how does ASC manage its funding?

Currently, ASC still relies on grant income to fund the majority of its operations. However, revenues from logo licensing will grow as ASC establishes itself in key markets and the number of certified products increases. In a couple of years, ASC aims to be largely funded from commercial revenue, as ASC certification programme and logo become firmly established in the marketplace. To ensure that self-sufficiency can be achieved over such timescales, ASC actively seeks partnerships to reduce operational overheads. We collaborate with the MSC, share their chain of custody (COC) platform and use their product approval team to monitor use of the ASC logo. Existing COC holders can simply expand the scope of their original COC certificate to include ASC products and ASC logo licence control will be familiar to those already engaged with the MSC.

ASC was co-founded by the WWF and the Sustainable Trade Initiative (IDH). How are both organisations involved in running ASC?

ASC operates as an independent organisation, even though we still work closely with WWF and IDH on various projects. As I mentioned earlier, in the second week in September this year, ASC, MSC and WWF Netherlands are running the Think Fish Week campaign in the Netherlands. We also work closely with various WWF country offices when their staff are engaging the local aquaculture industry to seek ASC certification. ASC also works with IDH on initiatives such as the Farmers in Transition Fund (FIT). The fund has been created by IDH to stimulate and support the production of responsibly farmed shrimp that will help reduce the environmental and social impacts of aquaculture.

Looking ahead, is ASC involved in any forthcoming events or conferences?

In February 2014, we plan to hold our global market launch for ASC-certified salmon at the Fish International seafood show in Bremen. This will be a big milestone for ASC. The introduction of salmon will place the ASC logo and certified salmon in the spotlight for global consumers wishing to purchase responsibly farmed fish.

We will also have a presence at the 2014 International Seafood events in Brussels and Boston.

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