



## **Our Oceans Could Be Fished Sustainably: A New Way Forward is Possible**

*An look at sustainable fishing and the role of big seafood companies*

**Chris Davies, former chair of the European Parliament's Fisheries Committee and moderator of the "Blue Deal Debate" webinar series.**

Will something good come from it? One of the highlights of the webinar Blue Deal Debates was the suggestion from an influential insider that the world's major seafood companies might welcome a political partnership with the European Union to promote the sustainability of fish stocks. Surely there is an opportunity here waiting to be seized?

Organised by Rud Pedersen Public Affairs in Brussels, BDD-6 on June 23 asked whether the global seafood companies should be doing more to promote ocean sustainability. My guests were Darian McBain, global director of sustainability and corporate affairs for Thai Union, Will McCallum, director of oceans for Greenpeace UK, and Roberto Cesari of the European Commission's DG Mare, who heads the unit dedicated to the fight against IUU (illegal, unregulated and unreported) fishing.

With the ten largest seafood companies alone having a combined turnover of more than \$35 billion their potential influence of these

businesses on fishing practices is very considerable. They buy the fish, sometimes from boats they own themselves, and prepare it for sale in the supermarkets. Thai Union is the third largest seafood company, and the world's largest provider of canned tuna which is sold under a variety of brand names, yet like its business rivals its name is largely unknown. We hear little of environmentalists trying to shape the policies of these key players.

"It's hard to campaign against companies that no-one has heard of," explained Will McCallum, while praising Thai Union for being an advocate of sustainability. Indeed, the company wins awards for its practices and commitment to promoting traceability; it claims that the contents of every one of its tuna cans can be traced back to the vessel that caught it. But the competition between seafood companies to win the sustainability prize is far from as competitive as we might wish.

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The latest report from UN’s Food and Agriculture Organisation says that 90% of the world’s seas are being fished at least up to their maximum potential. It warns that the proportion now being overfished, with fish stocks being depleted in consequence, has grown to 34%. Sustainability is still

a distant dream.

Darian McBain argued that in the past five years Thai Union and its rivals had woken up and now understood that bringing about change was a necessary part of their business. The leading companies have forged an alliance, SeaBOS (Seafood Business for Ocean Stewardship), with the declared ambition “of leading a global transformation towards sustainable seafood production and a healthy ocean.” The problem is whether the delivery matches the ambition.

SeaBOS has set itself the objective of ensuring, by 2030, that at least 75% of global seafood production is environmentally sustainable “or making verifiable improvement”. This is a long way adrift from the United Nations target of SDG 14, which calls for an end to overfishing and implementation of science-based management plans not in ten years’ time but now.

As our Blue Deal discussion progressed the list of required actions grew. Tell us who are the beneficial owners of the fishing vessels with which you work, said Roberto Cesari, no doubt with an eye to tracking down those who really


control IUU fishing. Give governments details of the transshipment vessels that hardly ever come to port. Be very cautious when dealing with fishing boats flying flags of convenience. Tell us not only which vessels you work with but those that you have disassociated yourself from.

The global seafood companies may be respectable businesses but IUU fishing accounts for more than 20% of fish caught across the world and some of that is getting through the net and being bought by them.

“All the declarations are very nice but when it comes to the practical reality sometimes I find a different picture,” said Cesari. Far from being advocates of tougher regulation he suggested that the reason that governments didn’t improve their management of the seas was because fishing interests lobbied against it.

Recent improvements notwithstanding, why are the seafood companies not doing more? Our discussion suggested that they have been slow to appreciate the importance of sustainability to their own businesses, which may seem astonishing to future generations. They are reluctant to spend time and money trying to persuade governments and Regional Fisheries management Organisations (RFMOs) to tighten the regulations and improve their enforcement. And they escape most of the public attention and scrutiny that might spur them into greater action.

All of which must make it hard for those who really do want to bring about improvement. Yet Darian McBain insisted that the seafood companies did now recognise the need for implementation of policies that promote sustainability and for stronger enforcement by governments.



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“My plea is let’s start working together. Let’s take SeaBOS. Let’s use it as a vehicle. Let’s set ourselves the challenge.



“When is the EU going to start talking to the CEOs? They are there. Different governments talk to CEOs but not to all of them and not collectively.”

Now if that’s not an invitation to the European Commission, with the clear indication that dialogue could stimulate progress towards the meeting of shared objectives internationally, then I don’t know what is.