

# There are plenty of fish in the sea. Or are there?

 By [Nicci Botha](#)

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The scary fact is that 80% of species are currently overexploited or fished out, but fish remains the most sought-after commodity in recent years. So how do we manage this resource to keep it sustainable?

This was the question posed on the second day, 21 May, of the Food for Thought conference in Cape Town, where various interest groups offered their opinions.



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## Bigger is not necessarily better

Dr Anthony Ribbink, CEO of the Sustainable Seas Trust, an organisation that develops education and training in relation to marine resources to cope with poverty and food security, entitled his presentation: "Big and old is bad, small and young is better, but don't forget the veg".

He explained that to be sustainable, the fishing industry should concentrate on harvesting smaller, younger fish as opposed to the larger breeding stock.

In addition mercury from industries such as mining drains into the sea and accumulates in the tissue of a fish as it ages. Therefore people are likely to ingest higher levels of mercury from eating larger size fish.

"The intrinsic problem is that unlike other farming practices you can't husband fish, so we need to think about husbandry for fishing as an option to keep the industry sustainable."

"In terms of food security, most of the stock pulled from the sea is high end, and does not go to the poor," he said. As to not forgetting the veg, he said that seaweed, which is high in nutritional value, should be looked at as a viable marine crop.

## **Setting the standard**

Harnessing the market to protect fishery resources and the productivity of marine ecosystems is the way to go, according to Michael Marriot of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

The MSC's vision is "of the world's oceans teeming with life, and seafood supplies safeguarded for this and future generations".

Its mission, in a nutshell, is "to use our ecolabel and fishery certification programme to contribute to the health of the world's oceans by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, and working with our partners to transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis".

"We therefore use our ecolabelling system as a means of certification of sustainable fishing sectors and changing consumer behaviour," he said.

Fisheries that undergo MSC's quality assurance programme earn the right to include the MSC logo on their product's label, thereby informing consumers that they are supporting a sustainable resource.

"An industry standard gives fisheries something to measure themselves against. Often a fishery thinks they are doing well in terms of their practices, but this may not be the case when weighed up against global standards," he said.

## **Green means go, red means stop**

The fact is that consumers have an insatiable appetite for seafood. In 1960, fish consumption averaged around 10kg per person per year and in 2014 that figure had escalated to 19kg per person per year, said Chris Kastern of the Southern Africa Sustainable Seafood Initiative (SASSI).

SASSI, launched under the World Wildlife Fund umbrella, aims at educating all links in the chain from fisherman to consumer as to which species are endangered and which are safe to eat through their lists - green (sustainable), orange (under threat) and red (unsustainable and illegal to sell in South Africa according to the Marine Resources Act).

SASSI is perhaps one of the most successful marketing campaigns in sustainability and education, with active engagement on social media and other mass communication platforms.

## **The small fry versus the big fish**

The rights, both in terms of social justice and their access to their traditional livelihood, of small-scale fishers versus commercial fisheries has come under the spotlight for a number of years.

So much so that government bent to pressure and engaged with fishers on the policy related to fishing rights. This was gazetted in 2012 and the implementation plan is ongoing, said Christiaan Adams of Coastal Links South Africa, an organisation championing the rights of small-scale fishers.

He pointed to the inequalities in the fishing industry, particularly regarding subsidies, such as fuel.

"Commercial operations use 35-million tonnes of fuel annually, while the small-scale fishers use 5-million tonnes, yet they

supply the same amount of fish to the market. Take away the subsidies and the big companies would be unprofitable."

It appears that there aren't so many fish in the sea, and that sustainability is largely dependent on balancing the interests of all the stakeholders - from the supplier to the consumer - through education and information.

*The Food for Thought conference took place at the CTICC in Cape Town from 20-21 May 2015. For more info, go to <http://foodforthought2015.co.za>.*

## ABOUT NICCI BOTHA

Nicci Botha has been wordsmithing for more than 20 years, covering just about every subject under the sun and then some. She's strung together words on sustainable development, maritime matters, mining, marketing, medical, lifestyle... and that elixir of life - chocolate. Nicci has worked for local and international media houses including Primedia, Caxton, Lloyd's and Reuters. Her new passion is digital media.

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