

CERTIFICATION, VERIFICATION OR FABRICATION?

An investigation of seafood environmental claims in Canadian retailers

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The expectation that businesses should embrace sustainable seafood policies as part of their corporate social responsibility commitments has led to a proliferation of seafood environmental claims in Canadian supermarkets. Many retailers and seafood companies have reacted to this market opportunity with eco-labels and environmental claims, which may or may not be anchored in robust criteria or third-party review.

Misleading and unsubstantiated claims can lead to consumer confusion and skepticism. Such “greenwashing” claims have the potential to undermine the role that credible seafood eco-labels can play to drive “on the water” improvements to fisheries and aquaculture.

Our study is the first to investigate the rigour of seafood environmental claims in the Canadian retail marketplace. We tested claims by going to 18 supermarket locations across five Canadian cities and provinces. Our sample consisted of 234 environmental claims across 181 seafood products. We classified seafood environmental claims into three categories: certifications, endorsement claims and self-declarations.



original photo: Hans-Petter Fjeld



ENVIRONMENTAL CLAIM TYPES

CERTIFICATIONS

A certification relies on compliance with criteria created either internally or through an external multi-stakeholder process. These criteria are held by the “standard-holder” and are typically implemented by a third-party auditor. The standard-holder can be from a non-government organization, industry, government agency or a hybrid of these. The most prominent global eco-certification programs in the Canadian market are the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) for wild fisheries and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) and Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) for farmed seafood.

ENDORSEMENTS

Several conservation groups provide seafood rankings or recommendations based on a set methodology that evaluates a seafood’s environmental impacts. Fisheries and farms, usually at a regional or industry-wide level, are assessed using the set methodology. The seafood assessment’s final ranking is assigned using the group’s defined thresholds. Some ranking groups partner with businesses and, in turn, endorse certain seafood products that meet their defined threshold (e.g., Ocean Wise Recommended, Seafood Watch “Best Choice” and “Good Alternative”).

Endorsements can also be provided by groups that endorse certain harvest practices (e.g., Earth Island Institute’s Dolphin Safe label, which approves tuna fishing companies that do not chase, kill or set nets on dolphins); or verify where a seafood item has been caught (e.g., the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute’s origin claim: Alaska Seafood “wild, natural and sustainable” label).^a

SELF-DECLARED CLAIMS

Some seafood businesses, including retailers and wholesalers, choose to self-declare or claim that they offer sustainable seafood (e.g., a seafood product is marketed as “sustainable” or “responsible” but with no third-party verification). The transparency and rigour of the criteria and the system behind the claim can vary greatly between one claim and the next. This type of claim typically lacks any independent oversight and the decision to use the claim is made in-house by the company.

^a It should be noted that the ASMI origin claim is separate from ASMI trademarked “Certified Sustainable Alaska RFM” certification claim.

FINDINGS

Our investigation confirms that not all seafood environmental claims in the Canadian marketplace are equal. They differ according to the availability, and quality, of evidence to back up the stated claim.

Certification claims lead the way: We found claims on all 55 certified products to be verifiable due to the chain-of-custody evidence that these programs offer on their products and websites. Among all claims types, certifications were the most reliable in having evidence to back up their claims and information with which to assess the product's sustainability.^b

Endorsement claims are mostly verifiable: The majority (65 of 77) of third-party endorsements had information available about the claim on the company and/or endorser's website(s) to back up the claim. The sustainability of more than half (44 of 77) of endorsement claims was verified. We had difficulty, however, when it came to verifying the sustainability of canned tuna products bearing third-party endorsements.

Self-declared claims fall short: Self-declared claims were the most frequent environmental claim type across the Canadian retail market, accounting for 102 of 234 claims observed in our study. This means that many claims in the Canadian market are not subject to any independent oversight or standard (unlike certifications and endorsements). We found that 41 of 102 claims lacked the evidence needed to substantiate them. In turn, this meant the sustainability of products with self-declared claims were the hardest to verify – only 36 of 102 self-declared claims were verified. Thereby, six out of every ten self-declared claims had unverifiable sustainability. We also found nine self-declared claims on products for which the information and evidence provided indicated that they were made from unsustainable sources. These claims are, therefore, misleading consumers.

Further, when assessed against the International Organization for Standardization (ISO) standard for self-declared environmental claims (ISO 14021), and the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling's (ISEAL) credible claims criteria, we found vague and non-specific claims were rampant among self-declarations, and many overstated environmental benefits and were not consistent with the standards.

Environmental claims do not translate to better product labelling. We expected that products with sustainability claims would have strong product labelling. However, we found poor seafood product labelling to be an issue across all claim types. Consistent with other labelling studies, products examined in this report rarely provided label information on the country of harvest, species name or harvest method.

Overall, we found misleading and unsubstantiated claims are present on products sold by Canadian retailers, with the potential to undermine improvements truly aimed at sustainability. Our investigation found evidence of misleading and unsubstantiated claims in the Canadian marketplace, predominantly in self-declared environmental claims which typically lack the independent standard and oversight that credible certifications offer.

The presence of misleading and unsubstantiated claims has potentially significant ramifications, including shifting consumer preferences to products that are not sustainably fished or farmed, contributing to environmental and/or social harm, increasing consumer confusion and skepticism toward all environmental claims and undermining the efforts of credible certification schemes.

^b We verified product sustainability based on the most commonly recognized and accepted sustainability standards: ASC or MSC certification, BAP 2 star plus certified shrimp, Ocean Wise recommended or Seafood Watch green ranked. The product label information and available claim evidence were used to classify the sustainability ranking of each product as either "verified" (i.e., meets one or more of the identified sustainability standards) or "not verified" (i.e., "unsustainable", "unknown sustainability" "unranked"). *We note that there are objections/disagreements within the conservation community on the sustainability of certain certified fisheries and farms that are beyond this study's scope.*

RECOMMENDATIONS



Retailers and seafood companies:

Prioritize certification claims over other types of claims, and where certifications are unavailable, choose endorsements over self-declared claims. When self-declared claims are used on products you sell, ensure they comply with international best practices for environmental claims (such as those of the ISO and ISEAL alliance).

Regardless of the claim type, evidence to back up claims should be clear, easily accessible and readily available to consumers.



Government:

Establish stringent seafood labelling laws, like those of the European Union, which would aid in substantiating the environmental credentials and claims of a given product. Specifically, seafood labels in Canada should have the following information: scientific name, geographic origin (where caught or farmed), production method (farmed or wild), and gear type or farming method. The implementation of Fisheries and Oceans Canada and the Canadian Food Inspection Agency's mandated boat-to-plate traceability program will help provide the information needed for more detailed labelling.

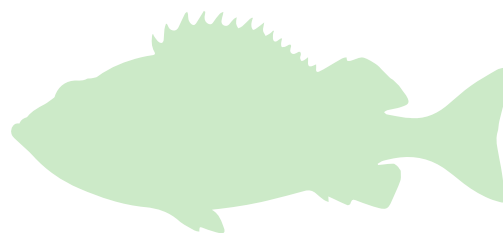
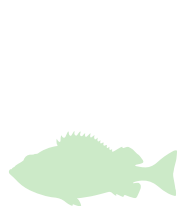
For self-declared claims, the government should strengthen requirements for the use of the terms "sustainable" or "responsible" by stipulating that only third-party verification is acceptable evidence to support their use.



Consumers:

Choose certified products where possible and complement these with endorsed products. Regardless of the claim type, but particularly when purchasing self-declared products, look for evidence to back up the claim on the product or website. Tell your retailer and the seafood companies that sell within their stores that you expect them to provide this evidence.

If a product with an environmental claim lacks evidence to back it up, or if you suspect the claim may be a deceptive representation of the product (i.e., greenwashing), contact the Canadian Food Inspection Agency to **report** a food labelling concern.



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