Aquaculture certifications exclude local stakeholders at their peril

For Immediate Release:

VANCOUVER and HALIFAX — The lack of transparency and stakeholder inclusion in some of the largest aquaculture eco-certifications in the global seafood marketplace is a threat to their legitimacy, a new SeaChoice report finds.

The report, *Accountability in Seafood Sustainability: Improving the legitimacy of aquaculture certifications through better transparency and stakeholder inclusivity*, reviewed the extent to which the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and GLOBALG.A.P. are a product of and a platform for civil society stakeholder engagement. The assessment was based on defined best practices in external accountability as informed by peer-reviewed literature.

Consumers will find these certifications’ eco-labels at their local grocery store on seafood such as farmed salmon, shrimp, basa and tilapia. Retailers often refer to these certifications as part of their sustainable seafood procurement policies.

SeaChoice found that all three certifications claim adherence to guidelines or codes of conduct on stakeholder engagement such as those prescribed by GSSI, FAO and, in the case of ASC, ISEAL. Still, all have room for improvement in how and when they engage with civil society stakeholders. That said, the ASC was found to be the most inclusive and transparent eco-certification.

As a form of market-based governance, voluntary sustainability certifications rely on external parties — including civil society stakeholders — to buy into them or risk losing market support. As advocates for environmental protection and/or social responsibility, civil society stakeholders such as non-governmental organizations, as well as local communities, can have a significant stake in certification decisions.

"When local communities and NGOs are denied the opportunity to contribute to certifications, including audits, these certifications miss out on valuable expertise, on-the-ground oversight and local knowledge," stated Shannon Arnold, SeaChoice Steering Committee member from Ecology Action Centre. “Excluding stakeholders is likely to affect whether or not legitimacy is granted to a certification.”

Of particular concern was the lack of requirement to consult with local stakeholders during farm audits under the BAP and GLOBALG.A.P. schemes. Additionally, neither certification makes audit reports available on its website to demonstrate a farm’s compliance with its standard. In comparison, the ASC requires auditors to consult with local stakeholders and publish audit reports.

The GLOBALG.A.P. certification also lacks any civil society stakeholders on its standard-development committees and governance bodies. These groups consist solely of industry representatives.
“Including civil society stakeholders at the governance and committee levels is essential for ensuring all viewpoints are adequately represented and considered,” said Kelly Roebuck, from Living Oceans Society and lead report author. “It also helps combat any perceptions that industry is playing the role of ‘the fox guarding the henhouse.’”

SeaChoice has provided each certification with tailored recommendations. These include ensuring civil society stakeholders are included in governance and committees, standard-development and audit processes, as well as publishing audit reports, establishing a monitoring and evaluation program and adopting third-party complaint mechanisms.

-end-

Media contact:

Karen Wristen - Executive Director at Living Oceans Society and SeaChoice steering committee member - phone: 604-696-5044, cell: 604-788-5634, email: kwristen@livingoceans.org

Kelly Roebuck - Sustainable Seafood Campaigner at Living Oceans Society - kroebuck@livingoceans.org

Shannon Arnold – Senior Marine Program Coordinator for Ecology Action Centre and SeaChoice Steering Committee member email: sarnold@ecologyaction.ca, cell: 902-446-4840

About SeaChoice: SeaChoice is a collaboration of three internationally recognized organizations — the David Suzuki Foundation, Ecology Action Centre and Living Oceans Society — that use their broad, national expertise to find solutions for healthy oceans. SeaChoice is a science-based, solutions-focused influencer, advocate and watchdog leading the next evolution of seafood sustainability in Canada. This includes working to improve seafood eco-labels, including certifications. Previous stakeholder representation associated with SeaChoice partner organizations includes the Salmon Aquaculture Dialogue and the ASC Technical Advisory Group. A DSF representative is a current stakeholder on the Technical Consultation Group for the ASC sea lice revision. SeaChoice and/or partner organizations have made previous stakeholder submissions to all three certifications during public consultations.

Background:

The report evaluates the transparency, accessibility and engagement opportunities available to civil society stakeholders of the three most prominent aquaculture certifications – the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC), Best Aquaculture Practices (BAP) and GLOBALG.A.P. The report was conducted in light of growing dissatisfaction by the NGO community that schemes are not adequately engaging stakeholders, with the aim to identify where certifications can make improvements to maintain or improve legitimacy for their scheme.

**Findings:** We found that all three certifications have room for improvement in how and when they engage with civil society stakeholders, although this is more relevant for some than others. SeaChoice calls on:

1. GLOBALG.A.P. to establish civil society as stakeholders on standard-development committees and governance bodies.

2. BAP and GLOBALG.A.P. to establish processes that will ensure civil society stakeholders are consulted during audits and publish audit reports.

3. ASC, BAP and GLOBALG.A.P. to strengthen stakeholder consultation on all relevant standard changes and auditing guidelines; and ensure responses are provided to stakeholders and published.

4. BAP and GLOBALG.A.P. to establish a monitoring and evaluation program.

5. ASC, BAP and GLOBALG.A.P. to strengthen dispute-settlement processes by adopting independent third-party mechanisms.