



Seafood Industry Australia

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Futureye

Executive Summary

Seafood Industry Australia (SIA) is the national peak body representing Australia's seafood industry.

It intends to develop a 'charter or promise' to demonstrate the industry's intent to earn its 'social licence to operate.'

SIA commissioned Futureye, as experts in social licence, to review existing research into community attitudes, as well as other market research, that has been undertaken since 2014 and to make recommendations about what to address in this charter or promise.

Based on our analysis, we recommend the charter should reflect the industry's commitment to:

1. Ensure that sustainability, of both fishing stock and habitat protection, is a primary focus;
2. Ensure that accountability for industry participants who break the rules is addressed;
3. Ensure that community engagement becomes an important element of strategy formation and execution;
4. While addressing the potential of aquaculture and fish farming to reduce reliance on wild harvest and overfishing, acknowledge environmental concerns and commit to transparent investigation and mitigation of these issues, and
5. Acknowledge that the community is cynical about valuing the economic contribution of industry over concerns about its operations and impacts.

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2 Introduction

Seafood Industry Australia (SIA) believes that the values and expectations of the community can impact on the industry operations. It is therefore beneficial to understand changing values and expectations in order to mitigate future or emerging risks to the operating and regulatory environment.

The phrase that describes this approach is ‘social licence’. This is the implicit acceptance by society of an organisation, product, service, or project. It is generated when the behaviour of organisations is perceived to be aligned with or exceeding societal expectations. It is lost when behaviours are perceived to be out of alignment with societal values and expectations.

In terms of the seafood industry, this can be summarised as it having the necessary practices and policies in place that ensure the future of fish species and the marine environment while at the same time providing sufficient supply of fish for commercial and recreational fishing needs.

In order to understand society’s current values and expectations about the industry, Futureye was commissioned to review research since 2014 that we have undertaken about the industry, as well as research undertaken by others, and make recommendations that can inform a highly effective charter or promise.

These include:

“Community perceptions of the sustainability of the Australian fishing industry” June 2017, survey and report by Intuitive Solutions, commissioned by the Fisheries Research and Development Corporation (FRDC).

“Consumer Sentiment Towards Australian Fresh Food & Fibre Benchmark Report” March 2018, Quantum Research for the NSW Department of Primary Industries and the NSW Farmers’ Association.

“Let’s Talk Fish: Assisting industry to understand and inform conversations about the sustainability of wild-catch fishing” 2014, Dr. Nicki Mazur, Professor Allan Curtis and Mr. Andy Bodsworth on behalf of the FRDC.

“Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management” June 2015, market research Essence Communications, for Department of Agriculture & Water Resources

Additionally, we reviewed these findings against similar research Futureye had undertaken for individual industry participants, as well as for the Northern Territory Seafood Council. This research confirms the findings in the reports listed above.

3 Social licence issues

The primary concerns raised for the fishing industry from a community perspective are those surrounding environmental sustainability and industry and government accountability.

Sustainability of fishing practices

Futureye's research identified that community members viewed environmental sustainability as the chief concern when considering Australia's seafood industry. The following are the key concerns of community members when addressing environmental sustainability.

Global overfishing

There is a perception that the sustainability of fisheries is compromised by a short-term, profit driven approach to managing fish stock. While this view is applied less to Australian fishery management than to fishing practices globally, Futureye has found that this perspective does resonate with some stakeholders.

In relation to overfishing of Australian stock, Futureye's research indicates community members have adopted a 'hear no evil' approach, stating that if they have not heard major problems in relation to the fishing industry, then it is not of concern. Though this may be a seemingly favourable position to be in in the short-term, it presents a potential risk to the industry if negative information relating to overfishing was to suddenly break into mainstream media and alter perspectives.

Other stakeholders have stated that Australian fishery management is only slightly better than the rest of the world. There is a strong perception that the government cares more about the economy than the environment (Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management, p.21). Perceptions of global unsustainable fishing support this narrative (Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management, p. 21).

Perceptions of the fishing's industry's sustainability as a whole have become more positive in recent years. It should, however, be noted that 59% of survey respondents still believe that overall the fishing industry is not sustainable (*Community perceptions of the sustainability of the Australian fishing industry -2017 research* (p. 11). Further, nearly a third of respondents believed that sustainability and maintaining fish stocks, either through a quota system, minimising undersized catch or through developing aquaculture, was a key issue facing the industry (p. 14, Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management).

Commercial fishing vs farmed fishing

Perceptions of the sustainability of commercial fishing were identified as the most significant influence on views of the industry's sustainability as a whole (*Community perceptions of the sustainability of the Australian fishing industry -2017 research*, p. 9). Importantly, the same report (p. 11) found that commercial wild catch was perceived to be the least sustainable form of fishing. There was a general concern that commercial fishing can cause both overfishing of targeted stock and by-catch, which can impact on biodiversity and ecology. These were also key concerns identified by stakeholders when Futureye conducted work in 2017 with the Australian Council of Prawn Fisheries.

Fish farming was viewed as the most sustainable form of fishing, and was largely endorsed by members of the Australian community. However, despite its largely positive perception, some community members identified that fish farming has the potential to pollute waterways, and may raise the level of mercury in fish (*NSW farmers benchmark report – seafood specific only, and its position amongst others – 56*).

Australia's unique marine environment

Futureye found that messages around the uniqueness and pristine nature of Australia's environment did well to address the concerns of stakeholders. Messages such as, "Australia is one of the few places in the world with a diverse marine ecosystem and we need to look after it," (Community Attitudes Towards Australian Fisheries Management, p. 18) indicated a commitment to maintain Australia's valuable environment, ecology and biodiversity. Messages that focused on the adequacy of efforts of government and/ or industry to enhance environmental outcomes received a weaker reception, with stakeholders suggesting more government involvement is required to ensure fisheries are sufficiently regulated and protected.

Industry, jobs, and income

Community members were largely unsympathetic to jobs that may be lost as a result of a diminished seafood industry or lowering of catch limits. Preserving Australia's valuable environment for future generations was seen as being of significantly greater concern than short-term losses of jobs for the industry (*Community perceptions 2017, pg. 26*).

Accountability of industry participants

Role of government

There is a general perception that the government's role is to regulate specific actions, limit the capture of non-targeted species and enforce against illegal activity (Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management, p. 16). Presently there is a strong agreement that the government's focus is on the economy rather than the environment, which is fuelling distrust of both the government and industry (Community attitudes towards Australian Fisheries Management, p. 16).

Distrust in the government and industry

Community members were extremely distrustful of the fishing industry, with only 15% believing that the industry can be trusted (Let's Talk Fish, p.46). Similarly, only 22% of stakeholders believe that the government could be trusted, with over half stating that government has not adequately explained current sustainability measures (Let's Talk Fish, p. 47). Money was seen to be the most corrupting influence causing distrust of the industry and government.

Those who distrusted the industry also cited a lack of research or selective distribution of information as a cause for distrust. There was a sense that technical information needs to be made more readily available to allow stakeholders to make their own conclusions on the industry's efforts to improve outcomes.

Twenty-seven percent of respondents did not think they could rely on government to manage fisheries for either sustainable fish stocks or viable fishing communities (Let's talk fish, p. 46). Further, thirty-seven percent of respondents did not agree that the industry could be relied on to reduce harm to marine animals or sustain fish stocks for future generations (Let's talk fish p. 46,).

Independent certifications of fisheries, such as MSC, ASC and Friend of the Sea, were seen to be relatively trustworthy and may improve the perception of fisheries with community members (Community Perceptions 2017, p. 10).

Misperceptions

Public and stakeholder (mis)perceptions were cited as a major issue affecting the wild-catch fishing industry's social acceptability. Interview respondents from Let's talk fish (p. 38) were concerned that conclusions about commercial fishers harming the environment were flawed as they were based on an understanding that commercial fishing, "catches everything in its path." This misperception was seen to negate genuine efforts by members within the industry who conduct their practices sustainably. There was also a perception by those interviewed that these perspectives were built on overseas fisheries management, and were distorted by ENGOs, who have louder voices than others, such as industry or government (Let's talk fish, p. 39).

4 Practices

This section focuses on specific behaviours or practices within the industry that community members are concerned about. They are ranked in order of most to least concern, as identified by Futureye.

1. *Overfishing.* Overfishing is perceived to be of chief concern within the fishing industry. There is a perception that fishers are fishing beyond their allowed limits, resulting in depleting fish stocks to unsustainable levels.
2. *Trawling.* There is a belief that trawling has the capacity to significantly damage habitats and impacts on biodiversity and environmental sustainability.
3. *Bycatch and discards.* There is a general concern that trawlers and other fishing vessels catch wildlife such as seals and dolphins in their nets, causing injury or death.
4. *Pollution from aquaculture/fish farming.* There is a perception that pollutants from aquaculture will leech into the water table, presenting an environmental risk. Similarly, there are concerns that pollutants from fish farms damage the immediate environment around and under the pens.
5. *Elevated mercury in the product from aquaculture.*
6. *Depth trauma.* There are concerns about cruelty in the industry, such as the crushing of fish at the bottom of nets when they are raised to the surface quickly.
7. *Unfavourable contact with industry.* There is a concern that members within the industry do not care about the community and will willingly confront those who challenge the industry.
8. *Safety in the industry.* There is a perception that some vessels are unsafe and that physical injury rates are seen to be too high. There is also concern that the fishing industry is rife with bullying, causing widespread mental health issues.
9. *Indigenous community involvement.* Futureye has identified a general concern about the lack of indigenous involvement in the fishing industry, especially in the Northern Territory where the Blue Mud Bay High Court decision has affirmed land rights extend to the intertidal zone.

Futureye has conducted previous research on a number of the above issues, which are discussed in further detail below.

Indigenous Australians involvement in the industry

The fishing industry could benefit from building stronger relationships with Traditional Owners. The industry encourages indigenous involvement, however there have been reported cases of Traditional Owners catching fishery operators illegally fishing near their communities and interfering with sacred sites. There is also a perception that commercial fishers display a sense of entitlement to fish these areas. These attitudes will perpetuate barriers to the inclusion of Indigenous communities in the Australian fishing industry.

Traditional Owners are also concerned about management decisions made by government regarding the fisheries surrounding their land. Traditional Owners have suggested that the government is not taking local impacts or interests into consideration when making decisions.

Safety and welfare of the fishery working environment

For a third year in a row, fishing was found to be one of the most hazardous industries in Australia. There is a general concern that this is perceived to be a badge of honour by some within the fishing community.

Concerns related to discards and Threatened and Endangered Protected Species (TEPS)

There is a perception that professional fishers are not taking enough ownership of their performance, as evidenced by the volume of bycatch and the bycatch of Threatened Endangered and Protected species (TEPs).

User groups have expressed concerns that the industry does not accurately report bycatch and TEPS interactions. There is also concern that the industry is not seeking to improve its impact on TEPS. Whether the views are accurate or not, it creates a significant lack of trust in industry's operation between user groups, such as recreational fishers and within Aboriginal communities.

Catch and release

Studies show that fish that are caught and then returned to the water suffer such severe physiological stress that they often die of shock. Fish often swallow hooks, and anglers may try to retrieve a hook by shoving their fingers or pliers down the fish's throat, ripping out not just the hook but some of the fish's throat and guts as well. When fish are handled, the protective coating on their bodies is disturbed. These and other injuries make fish easy targets for predators once they are returned to the water.

Some animals are totems for Indigenous people. Traditional Owners have a spiritual connection with some animals and they are considered sacred. By-catch that is discarded is viewed as wastage and does not align with Indigenous culture.

Suffocation and sudden change in pressure

"Every year billions of animals are pulled out of the water in huge nets to be killed for 'food'. As animals are pulled to the surface, many are crushed to death under the weight of so many other animals. Others suffer from burst eyes and organs due to the sudden change in pressure. Those who are not dead before they hit the boat deck, will suffer a slow and painful death from suffocation." Dr Culum Brown, Animals Australia.

Un-sustainable and unprofessional behaviours in the wild-catch fishing industry

There is a general concern that there is a failure of participants in the seafood industry to adopt more sustainable practices, or where they have done, how it is demonstrating this uptake. There is a perception by some that the industry is not prepared to adopt sustainable activities, and that there is a belief that fishers have a 'right to fish' over a responsibility as stewards for a shared resource.

5 Conclusions

The most critical issues affecting the community's views of, and concerns about, Australia's seafood industry should be the focus of the charter or promise being developed by SIA to demonstrate the industry's intent to earn its social licence to operate.

1. Ensure that sustainability - fishing stocks and habitat - is the primary focus of the promise or charter.

Sustainability is the key positive value the community is seeking from the industry. Their concerns around this have increased over the time-frame analysed by the research. They are concerned that there is insufficient accountability to ensure the industry is genuinely complying with the science and government regulations to ensure this occurs.

2. Ensure that accountability for industry participants who 'break the rules' is a major element of the charter.

The research confirms that the community believes that strong government action and a strict regulatory environment are important elements to ensure the industry is genuinely focussed on improving sustainability of the fish stocks and the environment.

In particular, there is heightened awareness about the sustainability of fish stocks elsewhere in the world, and the perceived ill-effects of 'super trawlers' and overfishing. These issues affect the community's view of the Australian industry and whether it can achieve sustainability and mitigate adverse environmental impacts.

3. Ensure that community engagement becomes an important element of strategy formation and execution.

The research confirms that, the more people are aware of the operations of the industry, its participants and systems, and its commitment to more transparently listen to and engage with society's values, the more they appreciate its efforts to achieve sustainability.

Understandably, the less familiar people are with the issues, the more likely they are to be cynical that the industry's commitments are genuine.

4. While addressing the potential of aquaculture and fish farming to reduce reliance on wild harvest and overfishing, the industry must acknowledge environmental concerns and commit to transparently investigate them and provide solutions to mitigate the adverse effects.

The community is aware of the views of highly-involved critics, such as Greenpeace, and their concerns about aquaculture. While critics acknowledge that fish farming may play an important role reducing pressures on natural fish stocks, they are concerned about the environmental and other effects of intensive farming methods, such as the transmission of viruses and disease and harmful effects of pollution on the environment.

5. Acknowledge that the community is cynical about valuing the economic contribution of industry over concerns about its operations and impacts.

Increasingly, the community is more concerned with sustainability than with supply or the economic benefits of the industry to Australia. A focus on 'benefit-selling' therefore undermines the industry's credibility on its commitment to the environment and sustainability.

Once the Australian seafood industry establishes its commitment to addressing these issues to build greater understanding, trust and transparency about its operations, it will create opportunities for it to then reinforce the industry's benefits.

For example, Country of Origin labelling is seen by consumers as a positive way of empowering them to support a sustainable, healthy Australia seafood industry. Respondents indicate support for statements that highlight Australian seafood as healthier and the industry as having better health and safety standards and environmental outcomes than some overseas countries.

However, as stated above, 'benefit-selling' is only seen as credible after industry has acknowledged the concerns and dilemmas it faces and demonstrated its commitment change.



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