



Interview with Rupert Howes (Marine Stewardship Council)

Lissa Harris

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Lissa Harris: Can you start by introducing yourself and your organization, and talk a bit about the problem that you're tackling? How are you working on solving it?

Rupert Howes: My name is Rupert Howes. I'm Chief Exec of the Marine Stewardship Council [MSC], an international program working to incentivize, recognize, and reward sustainable fishing.

We're headquartered in London, United Kingdom, but we're very much an international, not-for-profit organization working broadly on ocean sustainability and fisheries. The problem we're trying to tackle is the plight of global fisheries where stocks have been fished to the point of collapse in some situations while demand for seafood has doubled and will double again. We're trying to create a program that works with the grain of the market: to connect producers of sustainable seafood with consumers, to create a market that demands sustainable, traceable seafood choices, and to provide market advantages to those fishers who are already operating at a sustainable level.

We demonstrate that through a third-party certification and verification program. But critically -- and this is where the change is delivered -- by shifting the entire market this way. We put incentives and supply chain pressure of the best kind on fisheries that might not be operating at a sustainable level and that, in many cases, need to make significant improvements in the way they fish our oceans to meet the standard and growing market expectations.

It sounds simple and easy, but it isn't. It sounds a bit dull when you say certification labeling assurance, but it isn't. What we provide is a tool, a mechanism, and it's really about the engagement of the fishing industry, civil society, the third-party assessment processes, and the market that is responsible for driving the change.



Lissa Harris: What would you say makes your approach distinctive from other folks who are working in this field, or who are working on this issue? What makes you different?

Rupert Howes: It is quite a broad church now, but when MSC was founded -- by Unilever and WWF [World Wildlife Federation] -- Unilever was the biggest purchaser of frozen whitefish in the world. They owned brands like Horton's in the States, Birdseye in the UK, and Iglo throughout Europe.

They came together with WWF, the world's largest international conservation organization, following the collapse of their iconic Grand Banks cod fishery. That was a fishery through which the Basque fishermen in Spain were feeding Europe in the Middle Ages, way before Columbus got to America. They were fishing the Canadian, eastern seaboard, finding plentiful supplies of cod.

Technology moved on. Sail gave way to steam to diesel, and more efficient boats for hunting and killing fish. That fishery collapsed in the early 1990s, and there's a very famous film of the fisheries minister being harangued by fishermen who'd lost their jobs and their livelihoods. Some 40,000 fishers lost their livelihoods. To this day, that fishery has largely remained closed. There's been a sort of ecosystem shift, and it has not recovered. That was the wake-up call for Unilever. No cheap, plentiful supplies of frozen whitefish, no Captain Birdseye, no Captain Iglo, no profits, no business.

In the early '90s, sustainable development enlightened self-interest. WWF set up the Forest Stewardship Council, and they wanted to see if they could do something similar in the marine space: creating a program that is supportive of fishing, but ensures it is done on a sustainable basis. A program that works with the grain of the market in partnership to recognize, reward, and catalyze change. When we were founded, there was no sustainable seafood movement. A lot of this was very new. There was a lot of skepticism and cynicism from some of the NGOs. There was this idea that if you are working with business, it's got to be corrupt, sopping with the devil.

I think within the industry, some of them felt, "You're just another NGO, getting between us and our customers. We want nothing to do with you." So I always say it was a bold idea. It's taken us a quarter of a century to turn it into a proven concept and to scale it. But when we started, there was nothing like it out there. We struggled with no supply, no market; no market, no supply.

We'd go to retailers and say, "Look, would you give preference to MSC-certified and labeled seafood?" And they'd say, "We absolutely agree with what you're trying to do in making sure there's seafood for this and future generations, and that oceans remain healthy, but only four or five fishes have been certified to your standard, and the vast bulk of our seafood supply isn't. What will that say to consumers?"



In fact, we don't certify anything. It's independent, third-party certification. Regardless, it took us a long time to overcome that. But fast-forward to now, and we've got something like 60% or 70% of all US and all Canadian landings, and at one point we had over 90% of Icelandic landings.

Since then, a sustainable seafood movement has developed, but we are probably the only certification and labeling program that is globally recognized. You have organizations like Monterey Bay Aquarium: Seafood Watch Program that operate a card system, but that's the sort of traffic-like system of green, amber, red. There's no fishery client, and there's no action plan to improve it. There's no traceability. So it is a very different proposition. We work closely with Monterey Bay, so we're all part of the solution, but doing different things. Others, like Pew and Oceania, work much more in the public policy space, although that's a scenario we've moved into as well.

Lissa Harris: Since your founding, what has happened to the proposition of NGOs and capitalists working together to solve these problems? Is it more mainstream now, or is the pushback against ESG [environmental, social, and governance] factors hurting that method of work? It's a broad question, but I'm curious.

Rupert Howes: A broad but important question. I think most sensible people who are trying to transform our systems of production and consumption to far more equitable and sustainable levels know we will never do that without working in partnership with the private sector. It simply won't happen.

A lot of this has been discussed and debated, and without doubt, the trends are all going in the wrong direction. We're exceeding planetary boundaries, ecological capital is being eroded, and we need to work with business. Yes, there are critics. There are purists who think you shouldn't be working this way, but they're not offering any alternatives. They might throw rocks from the outside, but they offer no solutions, let alone solutions that can be adopted and scaled. I'd argue that the industry and the market get this completely.

One, because they're human beings and they care about their families and future generations, and two, because it's just obviously the right thing to do. That's how MSC has managed to take off. We have maybe 20% of globally assessed stocks in the program. Some countries have 60%, 70%, even 80% of their landings in the program and the market. The other side of the coin is the market – the demand pool to bring fisheries in and reward those that are in – which is worth nearly \$15 billion. So you have Walmart, Kroger, Costco, and Cisco all building MSC to varying degrees into their procurement. Even McDonald's. I don't think you can buy a filet of fish in Canada, the US, or Europe unless the source fishery is MSC-certified.



What we've not touched on is that it can be very expensive for fisheries to get certified. MSC is the standard holder. We've developed a standard for ecologically responsible and sustainable fishing based on the UN Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries. It's all about the health of the target species and the sustainability of the wider impacts on the marine ecosystem. That could be bycatch, benthic impacts with the seafloor, or interactions with endangered, threatened, or protected species. All of this has to be looked at and assessed.

The third principle is all about robust management, which is a framework that is capable of responding to new information, be it climate predation, pirate fishing, or whatever is needed to manage those stocks. Fisheries come forward on a voluntary basis to be assessed against the standard by an independently accredited certification body, which will typically pull together a team of three experts. Those certifiers are obliged to notify stakeholders and encourage active participation and engagement. Anybody, any man and his dog, any country, government, or NGO can get involved in that assessment process and provide evidence. There's an independent peer review by another bunch of scientists. Then, if some of the engaged stakeholders still don't like the outcome, there's a quasi-judicial independent adjudication process.

Now, all of this probably sounds a bit dull and verbose and boring, but that's what builds credibility and robustness. It can cost hundreds of thousands for a fishery to get through. Many might get conditions that could cost hundreds of thousands more to improve to ensure that they'll carry on meeting the standard in the future. That standard is reviewed every five years and updated to reflect new science that's been widely adopted by management agencies. So we have a relatively costly, complex scheme, but fisheries stick with it because the market is sticking with it in terms of its commitments. We've seen this across the globe. Although we started in Northern Europe and America, where there was much more receptivity to an eco-labeling message, we're working in Africa, Asia, and all around the world now. We're an organization of about 260 people operating from 20 locations in the world of food service, retail, and of course seafood processing and harvesting.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a little bit about your stakeholders? Who are the people you are serving and working with, and how do they benefit from your work?

Rupert Howes: Let me touch on our governance, to start. MSC has been premised on a high degree of stakeholder engagement from the get-go. We have a board of trustees that is made up of scientists and leading experts from civil society, from NGOs, from the market, and from the fishing industry, but the majority are non-assigned independent board members.

In our peak governance body, we've got that broad church of constituents that we're working with. When I got to MSC, we had a stakeholder council of 40, again drawn from that broad church of



stakeholders. That's been streamlined down to about 18 people who are all very senior level, often chief execs and senior c-suite executives from different branches of our stakeholder community. We also have a technical advisory board made up of 15 to 18 leading fisheries scientists and critically leading supply chain experts to help the development and evolution of our policy and our process.

The stakeholder we're trying to serve is, ultimately, humanity, and we're about food and marine ecosystems. If MSC can succeed in delivering our vision, which is healthy oceans, productive marine ecosystems, and seafood secured for this and future generations, it will benefit humanity. Although our focus is on ecological sustainability, if fish stocks are managed well, the fishing communities and the livelihoods that depend upon them are going to be more resilient.

We see ourselves as contributing to the engagement of our partners with marine conservation and sustainability, and as contributing to global food security. Just to give you a sense of how important that is, the UN estimates that if you look not just at the direct fisher jobs, which are about 60 million, you will see there are about 500 million people employed in this last great industry, harvesting a wild resource for food together with aquaculture, which is growing farmed fish.

On the food side, on average across the planet, seafood makes up something like 17% of animal-derived protein needs. For many coastal communities and many poor communities, it is pretty much the only source of animal protein. You see different figures bandied around, from it being the main source for one billion people to perhaps three billion people on the planet. So it is super important, and all of our processes are premised on giving the opportunity of a wide degree of engagement. As I mentioned, the independent certification brings in Greenpeace, WWF, Pew, whoever it might want to engage, local NGOs in particular, along with scientists, the industry, and others.

Lissa Harris: Is there an example or a story you can share that illustrates the impact of the work that you do?

Rupert Howes: There are multitudes of stories, but one that I often refer to is very beautiful visually as well, and it illustrates many of the tensions and stress points of running the program as we do.

We had a fishery in South Africa, the South African Hake Fishery, that years ago came forward into assessment and NGOs said, "This fishery is not credible. They've got huge issues, what's going on?" And we said, "It's a voluntary program, they're not certified, and they've just come forward. They're lifting the lid and everybody can look in now and see what the real situation is."



Lo and behold, through the third-party assessment process, because they had to get the data – we're very data rich in terms of our requirements – they discovered there wasn't one stock of Hake, there were two, and one was overfished and they were killing maybe 10,000 seabirds every year. They're iconic, beautiful wandering albatross that would fly down and get caught in the nets and the trawl warps that are used on this trawling fishery.

Now, the market pool was so strong that this fishery said, "We've got to get MSC." MSC creates almost a brokerage service. WWF South Africa, Birdlife International, the South African government, and the industry all worked together to fix the issues to the point that they did get certified. In doing so, they brought in simple improvements, like Brady Bafflers, which are just ribbons on the trawl that scare the birds from flying in. They reduce the bycatch of birds by something like 90% to 95%.

Our requirements are that you continue to look at further reductions. The stocks were managed at a sustainable level, and the industry, not MSC, did some economic analysis to suggest that in the absence of MSC, the net present value of that fishery would be about 35% lower, and 12,000 critically important jobs—mainly female jobs in onshore processing—would be in jeopardy. In addition, about 200 million in market value had partly been gained because of MSC. To me, that personifies the ecological gains, the community livelihood benefits, and the food security [that results from] what we are trying to do. We have countless examples like that.

Lissa Harris: When you say the fishery came to you, what is a fishery? Is it individual, small business owner fishing boats coming together and organizing with each other, or is the government involved? What does that organization look like?

Rupert Howes: All of the above. It's not always the same. Typically, we work with an entire fishery. So in the states, where you see some of the best fisheries management in the world, the entire Alaska pollock fishery has come forward—all vessels, all gear types—for MSC certification. It's the same with Alaska salmon. All five species of Alaska salmon and all five gear types were assessed and all passed in the entirety. That makes chain of custody much easier because then all of the Alaska pollock is certified.

Other times you'll get first movers. In fact, I think this happened with the Pacific cod. You've got the freezer long line, which is a particular gear where they're catching the cod on a long line and freezing it. They wanted to move into MSC, but the rest of the fishery didn't. Therefore, the unit of assessment was a defined unit of those vessels. In this case, the freezer longline fleet was assessed.

For principle two, what wider impacts are fishing gear and technology having on the larger environment? Even though it's a subset of the fishery, principle one looks at the entirety of the



stock health. You can't have a sustainable bit of an unsustainable fishery. Similarly, the management regime is looked at in its entirety. So to answer your question on clients, or partners as we call them, typically it's a fisher's association, but sometimes, government is involved. For example, in a vast state of Western Australia, their government did a whole lot of due diligence and said, "MSC, you are the most credible, robust program out there. We want to give all of our 47 state-managed fisheries the opportunity to demonstrate their sustainability or get a route map to sustainability, by going into the process with you." They put in 15 million to help fund that.

That's the best of all situations, where MSC is used as a mechanism, and then other people, other funding, is leveraged. Those fisheries have come forward. We even got the first-ever pearl fishery, so there are certified pearls out there in Western Australia, and rock lobster and shark bait prawns. About 11 other species have gone through the pre-assessment action plans, all the way to full certification. Typically, we find that once there's a first mover, the rest of that unit will follow. We also find that, once certified, most fisheries try and keep their certificates.

Lissa Harris: If there's a fishery that's participating in this through a professional association of different vessels, what is the incentive for an individual vessel if they're not super interested in this? How is it enforced? What is the mechanism for keeping them aligned with the program?

Rupert Howes: We're a voluntary program. Some fisheries have several hundred vessels operating on them. It is up to the client group to ensure that all those who are listed as part of that assessment are following the rules. Fishers are typically the best enforcers because they don't want a free rider in the system. Part of the assessment is about principle three, the robustness of the management monitoring evaluation and control systems. The more that fishers understand what MSC is about, the more they tend to adhere to the program.

I've just come back from two days in the southwest of the United Kingdom, a beautiful part of the country where there are a number of certified fisheries, but there are many more who've just now gotten to know about MSC and come to understand: we're pro-fishing, and we're pro-eating fish, as long as it's done sustainably. We are working with them on what we call pathway projects in the precertification space.

We have an improver program now that we are beginning to scale in Africa, Asia, and Latin America, and that is equally applicable to smaller, community-based fisheries that wouldn't have the data yet or might not be operating at a level to get certified. So there's no claim, there's no logo, but we're using nearly 27 years of knowledge to help these fishers on their pathway. When they're exposed to the program, most fishers want to be part of it. They want to do the right thing.

Lissa Harris: What insights could others take from your work? What are the lessons that people could learn from the work that you do?



Rupert Howes: Broadly, I think humility is needed. When MSC started, there was this expectation that NGOs would think it was a good thing, that the industry would fall over to enter assessment, and that the market would embrace it, but that wasn't the case. Mistakes have been made along the way. It's very difficult to nail down the standard for environmentally responsible and sustainable fishing. Every five years we go through a fairly tortuous process of doing a standards review that can often polarize our stakeholders. We have the industry saying, "You're already the most costly, complex scheme out there," and NGOs saying, "We care about this and that, we feel you've got to raise the bar there and there." There are tensions and trade-offs. We don't always get that right. I think it's very important to invest heavily in governance.

That's my learning as chief exec. When I joined the organization, they had about eight weeks of funding left. They had just sacked a third of the workforce because they were going bust. So there were 26 staff on the payroll when I was offered the job, and only 16 when I got there. I was running out of money so quickly, and we were down to 12 staff members, but we had 70 individuals in the governance. It was absolute insanity, but we rebuilt from that because it was a brilliant idea. My learning as chief exec is that getting that governance piece right internally is critically important, but it's also important externally. We have so much dialogue and engagement, and sometimes, you just get to the point that people will say, "We know we've been heard, we don't like where you're going, but we understand why." That's sort of how it works, and it's not always easy. Humility and acknowledging the leadership of others are crucial.

That's why I'm always adamant that MSC is the tool. We'd be nothing without the engagement of the fishing industry, the market, and civil society helping give this some credibility. It's working, and we're scaling, and we are singularly ambitious in doing more, which is why we've set an ambitious goal of engaging over a third of landings by 2030 through the engagement of our partners. That will be our contribution to the SDGs [sustainable development goals], and to SDG 14 on oceans, in particular.

Lissa Harris: Does the percentage of landings in the program also reflect the percentage of fish caught?

Rupert Howes: Yes, it's in the ballpark. The United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization Fisheries Directorate are the guardians of keeping an eye on the health of global stocks. They produce a report every year or two, the SOFIA [State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture] report, which reports on the overall trends. If you look back at the 1970s, 10% of stocks that were assessed were viewed as overfished. It's now about 35%. I find it incredible that modern human beings have been around 200,000 years, and it took until 1850 for the population to first reach one billion.



When I was born in the 1960s, there were three billion people on Earth. We're now at seven billion, and we're heading toward ten. Not surprisingly, seafood production has gone up by factor five, demands have doubled and they're going to double again. This is having a profound impact on the marine ecosystem. We need all the solutions. Back to my point about humility, we need government and leadership, we need to set the right policies and create an enabling environment. We need NGOs to do the advocacy work and the partnership work, and to hold people to account. And we need market-based programs because we live in a market-based economy.

Lissa Harris: How do you measure success? What's the evidence that you look at to see that you are making progress?

Rupert Howes: We have a strategic research team, so we've got a multitude of cases showing improved overall biomass in the amount of fish out there, and more stability if it's in an MSC-certified fishery, which isn't surprising because it's got robust management that will respond to changing conditions and reduce quotas or fishing effort, whatever it might be.

We've got countless examples like the South African one of reduced impacts on endangered, threatened, and protected species. We've also got the growth of the program, and I take that as an indicator because we know that where stocks meet our standard, they are more resilient to climate change. They are more stable, and they're going to provide a more secure basis for the livelihoods of the fishers that depend upon them. So it's not gross for gross's sake, but clearly, the scale of the program is indicative of the impact it's having.

And we're evolving. We've launched this improver program. There is huge interest in it, so we're hoping to leverage funding from development agencies to do more work in that precertification space to build that pipeline of fishers en route to certification. We're also doing much more on the public policy side. When you do work on the public policy side, and you see your contributions and others' contributions leading to a change in public policy, again, it's an indication of being effective. So it's a combination of case study examples of biomass, health of the oceans, and improvements in marine mammal ETP species, or whatever it might be. But it's also public policy and the scale of the market.

Lissa Harris: Sometimes, working on social problems, we learn as much from things that don't work as things that do. Is there an example of something that you tried that didn't work, but that you learned an important lesson from?

Rupert Howes: Sometimes, as chief exec, I'm frustrated that things take time to improve and change, but at the same time, I've had to learn to be patient because if we develop a piece of policy, it goes through policy development. It goes to my technical board, who will review the work that the stakeholder advisory council does, which will then go to the board. We might have two or



three years of that sort of evolution, but that's quite important to make sure that you're getting it right.

We've launched a few innovations, in some of the traceability work we were trying to do, and in our improver program. Maybe we went out a little bit too soon, but I'm with Greta Thunberg on this: The world is on fire, and we need to do everything now. So you've got to balance that innovation and acceleration because there's an acute need that goes along with occasionally making mistakes. When you do make those mistakes, acknowledge them, and be prepared to turn the corner.

I've got a prime example of that. We go through these fisheries standards reviews that I mentioned, and the last one was extended for a period of four years, with 16 different projects. Then we had a global pandemic and everything went remote, and this project continued, but with tortuous governance meetings. There were people in Tasmania joining the same meeting as someone in Seattle, and people everywhere in the middle, some at four in the morning, progressing these projects.

I think we ended up launching this standard too soon and probably not fully tested. Consequently, we are having to push pause, review that standard again, and do more testing and refinement. Now, after a global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the global economic crisis, and high inflation, we've pushed this out to an already stressed industry that's dealing with an awful lot of things on the geopolitical side. It is always worth taking stock and changing course, whether that's changing what you're doing or changing the timelines based on the evolving context.

Lissa Harris: Are there barriers to your work, or challenges that you haven't been able to overcome yet? What are the broad structural issues or obstacles that stand in your way?

Rupert Howes: We were founded because of the failure of global governance to manage fish stocks sustainably. And when we were founded, there was deep concern about fisheries collapsing beyond the point of recovery and governments not doing the job that they were supposed to do. In a way, that explains why MSE struggled a bit with government relationships to begin with; many governments felt it was their sovereign right to manage their resources. Why are you, an NGO, coming in and trying to tell us how to manage fisheries? We never were. We were just providing a mechanism to demonstrate good sustainability.

That's changed now as we've scaled to the point that I've mentioned. Now, we find facing a lack of an enabling environment is the biggest barrier to going further. We need governments to manage fish stocks sustainably. We need governments to demonstrate leadership and international cooperation because of climate change.



I'll give you an example. About 3 million tons of fish that were certified mackerel, a super important commercial species in Northern Europe—herring, blue whiting—are all swimming north to cooler waters. The amount of change going on in the oceans is frightening. It's happening so quickly. Those fisheries have all lost their MSE certificates because the problem is that some of the richest nations in the world—the UK, Norway, the EU—are saying, "Yes, we agree with the science," but they're all setting unilateral quotas. When you add up the totality of these quotas, they're exceeding the scientific advice by 20%-40%. Under our program, they had to lose their certificates. They're not meeting principle three, which is, following the science and robust management.

That's hugely problematic, and only governments can resolve it. That's why MSC is now doing much more quiet public policy advocacy where we're engaging with delegations within what we call the RFMOs [regional fishery management organizations] that operate in the high seas. These management frameworks often work by consensus, and things move very, very slowly in a world that's moving very, very rapidly. One day we would like to see all fisheries managed sustainably, whether or not their MSC is relevant. The world needs robust management of fish stocks all around the world, no matter what scale, geography, or gear type, and we're going to need governments to do that.

The world is in a pretty perilous state. Globalization has its faults, but there is definitely a retreat from globalization that's acting on supply chains. **Seafood is the most traded primary commodity in the world -- more than tea, coffee, wheat, and dairy combined. There are all sorts of issues there about traceability; where fish goes to be processed and where it comes back. But on the whole, we've seen the industry keeping its commitments despite this tough economic environment. However, they can only do that so much.**

We need to keep all the plates spinning. We need to keep NGOs as critical friends, but we need to be broadly supported. We need governments to do more in terms of leadership and enabling policy environments, and we need the industry players to hold firm. There's still work to get beyond the 20%, or the 15% to 20%. We've got to get to our 33% plus.

Lissa Harris: I wonder if you could talk a little bit about your strategies for bringing about systemic change in this realm. How do you approach systems-level change?

Rupert Howes: I think our systems change work is how we got our Skoll Award in the first place. Back in 2007, Jeff Skoll and Sally Osberg could see MSC, and Jeff used to say, "We're a disruptor. We're challenging the status quo of a global industry." I think we're well on the path of delivering that disruption, that systemic change.



When you look at pre-climate impacts, you see 60%, 70%, 80%, even 90% of engagement by the fishing industry; that is pretty amazing. In some markets, 60%, 70% of the wild-caught fish all carry an MSC label. We have scaled, but we need to do more because ultimately it's about the entirety of the oceans and the entirety of the seafood supplies, which is what we've been touching on. So doing what we do, but faster, is one way of scaling, but also innovating. That's what I was mentioning about our improver program.

We've been using over a quarter of a century of knowledge, relationships, and understanding to create a program that will enable fisheries all around the world—whatever scale, geography, or gear type—to come in and have a confidential MSC pre-assessment, which assesses how you'll do against the three high-level principles. From that, there's an action plan developed, and then those fisheries work on that with a degree of verification to get to the starting gate of an assessment. Now, we're hoping to scale that work as a sort of step up to full certification because, going back to the evolution of the sustainable seafood movement, there are many fishery improvement projects out there. Some of them are excellent, and some of them are really good, but many have just languished. They're not really doing anything. They're not really improving, and there's no one really accountable.

The danger is that the market will then say, "MSC, or an equivalent, or an official improvement project, is not doing the world or anybody any favors if, after decades, they're sourcing from fisheries that aren't progressing." What we're hoping to do with our improver program is to bring a bit of time-limited discipline into that arena, with a five-year max and a degree of third-party verification to make sure things are progressing in a way that will help us scale. Plus, there is the government and public policy work that I mentioned earlier, which we do where we can, in partnership with others.

Lissa Harris: Can you talk a bit about what you think is most needed from other actors in this space to advance good systems-level change? What do other entities need to do?

Rupert Howes: Governments need to show leadership and make some hard calls; I can't say that enough. That might be telling their delegates that some of these negotiations on fish quotas need to take a haircut, and they need to go for a lower quota that won't be popular in the short term, but will be essential for the long-term viability of those stock populations into the future.

We need that, and we need responsiveness because the climate impacts I mentioned are happening very quickly. Management needs to catch up on international fisheries management in an era of a warming world, particularly with migratory stocks. That's all to do with allocation, and fish moving into new jurisdictions where, under the law of the sea, those countries can



legitimately take fish. But when the other ones who still want to catch them take the same, and the quotas exceed the science, there's a problem. That needs fixing.

There are instances of that all around the world. I think the NGO community plays a pivotal role, but sometimes there are expectations of perfection. I think this can undermine some trust and confidence in MSC. We are about sustainable resource management. You could get a local NGO that's been campaigning for years on a particular issue, and that wants zero interaction with a particular species, whatever it might be, but that's not how MSC works. We want to know that if there are interactions, they're within ecological limits, and there's not going to be irreversible harm. Occasionally, that can create some tensions. **As someone who's worked in the NGO movement all my life, I think there's currently a massive danger of expectations of perfection that's just delaying progress.** A good colleague of mine said the challenge with NGO communities is that they often corral the wagons and shoot in rather than out. That can be challenging on occasion.

Everyone can do more. I think we need fisheries to continue coming in, but we are a costly program, so there has to be a business case. And to have a business case, there has to be market support, and that's where we've got to recognize the good that's being done, even if it's not perfect.

Lissa Harris: Are there species that are just impossible to sustainably manage at this point? Are there fisheries that you've gone into and said, "This work isn't possible?"

Rupert Howes: No, because we are the international standard holder, and they're independently certified. If a fishery voluntarily goes into the program, we'll come and make those assessments. But there's the whole point about appropriateness of scale. A fishery could have a relatively small population of a fish species that's long-lived. You could probably still manage it sustainably, but you'd have a very low harvest.

It is all about proportionality and robust management. We don't get into the moral ethical side of should you or should you not be doing that, and we don't distinguish whether a fish is going into human consumption or pet food. These are very important questions, but what we're trying to do is already complex enough. We have what's called a confidential pre-assessment that I touched on. Most fisheries will commission one of the 20 or so independently accredited certifiers to say, "We're thinking of going to the MSC. What are our chances?"

It's more than this, but at the back of the envelope, you might have an issue with stock, or there's a gear issue. Your bycatch is too big, or there are huge data gaps you're not going to get through because you don't have the data. We're told that maybe half the fishers that have a pre-assessment receive that response, and then because the market pressure is so good, they



often go off and fix those issues. Then they come back into full assessment. The pre-assessment process might've happened a decade ago.

Some of the criticism we hear is, "Every fishery that comes in passes," but that's really not the case. Each fishery that comes in typically has conditions and actions that they have to deliver, and then there's a new standard and a new certification in every five-year cycle. We've had fisheries at the pre-assessment phase told, "You're not going to get certified here." And we've had fisheries entering full assessment and failing. We've had some who are certified no longer be able to meet the standard, but it's never up to us as the standard holder. It's up to the independent certifiers reviewing the evidence in a multi-stakeholder, very transparent way for that unique, particular fishery.

Lissa Harris: How do you see your work evolving over the next five years?

Rupert Howes: Five years takes us to 2030, and during this time, we are going to focus on making sure we have robust, credible standards. There's an awful lot of work and emphasis on looking at how we can make some amendments and improvements to the standard that we released. That's critical. Our in-transition, as we used to call it, to MSC, which we now call our improver program, is already gaining interest. We want to scale engagement in that area and build the pipeline, as it's critically driving improvements in the precertification space.

We'll be doing more with governments, doing more public policy advocacy work, and working more with consumers around the globe. We've got comms and social media teams who work with our commercial partners, who work on social media, with end consumers, and on a whole heap of programs with aquariums and zoos that work on public education to build more understanding and awareness of the issues. **If people choose to eat fish, they should ask questions: Where does it come from? Is it sustainable? If they see the MSC ecolabel, they know it is. It's independently assessed as being well-managed and sustainable, with traceability.**

Lissa Harris: I want to drill down a little about your work with governments. You have cases where you have multiple governments that have an interest in the same species, the same fishery, and the same certification process. How do you work with multiple national governments at the same time toward solving some of those problems? Are there strategies that you use to bring everybody to the table?

Rupert Howes: In the early years, we didn't really engage with governments because we are non-government and responding to the failure of global governance. Now, one of the biggest challenges is these RFMO-managed fisheries. For example, in the tuna fisheries, where there are multiple countries and distant water fleets, all are party to coming up with decisions on harvest control rules and harvest strategies, which were cornerstones of our standard. We will engage



with the delegates from those countries directly. We will work with our partners who might also engage because many of them want to keep their MSC certificates, and they want their governments to make the decisions that are needed to enable them to keep those certificates.

That's why it's pretty much a virtuous circle. Again, there are a thousand actors involved in trying to deliver some of the outcomes we want to see. But I have no doubt the work we're doing is becoming more and more effective. I think part of it is a quarter of a century of building relationships with the harvest sector and the market. When you get commercial entities from different countries around the world lobbying their delegates for the same things as the fishing industry, and then they go to a meeting and there's commonality, it helps push things along and oil the wheels to achieve what's required in terms of the right decision.

Lissa Harris: Is there anything we didn't get to that you think is important to touch on here?

Rupert Howes: You mentioned funding, and that is actually very important because whether it's in fishing, the sustainable seafood space, or other sectors, MSC has been fortunate to develop a very sustainable business model.

When I joined, our income was about one and a half million pounds, 99% of which was from philanthropy. We were funded by wonderful foundations like the Packard Foundation, Walton Family Foundation, Esme, Fairbank, Garfield, and Western. They gave us unrestricted funding to deliver the vision in whatever way we saw fit.

We couldn't, and still can't, have any financial interest in the certification process because there would be a conflict of interest. So we have independent certification of fisheries and independent certification of the entire supply chain. But if the retailer, or the market, says, "We want to put a label on, and we want to communicate to our consumers that we're taking our ESG business strategies seriously," we get a modest logo fee. That typically might be 0.3% on wholesale, so 3,000 on a million. It's not a huge amount, but as we've grown, we now generate maybe 32 million pounds. So we've gone from one and a half million to 32 million, of which about 30 million is coming from annual fees and logo licenses.

Of course, that goes up and down if fisheries lose their certificates. I mentioned that the Northeast and Atlantic pelagics have all gone. That's decreased income by about 3 million. But as we spread across the world with different fisheries and different jurisdictions, it's proven to be a very robust financial model that's enabled me to grow the organization based on our strategy and priorities, to invest more in the science, and to build up a reserve so it's not hand to mouth. It's very important that you look after your people, and a healthy organization has to be resilient in its own right to deliver its vision.



Lissa Harris is a freelance reporter and science writer (MIT '08) based in the Catskills of upstate New York. She currently writes about climate, energy, and environment issues from a local perspective for the Albany Times Union, her own Substack newsletter, and various other digital and print publications.

** This interview has been edited and condensed.*