

Some Observations On The AMCS Sustainable Seafood Guide

Last December I attended a presentation by Dr Colin Hunt, in Cairns, on the Australian Marine Conservation Society's (AMCS) **Sustainable Seafood Guide**, a booklet and on line guide to the relative sustainability of more than one hundred species. The Guide, that lists species as **Better Choice**, **Think Twice**, or **Say No** was compiled by Dr Hunt and four AMCS staff members after they consulted "numerous research reports, journal papers and other publications" and later subjected the assessments to a "peer review".

During his presentation and later discussions I was surprised at how little knowledge Dr Hunt had of Australian fisheries and aquaculture and during question time I advised that his description of salmon farming in Tasmania as pond culture was incorrect (it is sea cage culture), and he acknowledged he had never seen it himself.

After subsequent phone conversations with Dr Hunt and two of the AMCS staff contributors, phone discussions with two marine scientists who participated in the AMCS peer review process and a comprehensive look at the AMCS sustainability criteria, reference list and assessments I have come to the conclusion that the Guide is seriously flawed, misleading and not really helping consumers find sustainable seafood at all.

The AMCS criteria are too general, not objective or quantifiable, they are focussed on species rather than an individual fishery or particular aquaculture operations and the species' assessment as *Say No* etc were made after a desk top literature review by persons hardly qualified to undertake such a complex task: people without expertise in fisheries stock assessment, fisheries management or aquaculture -- the relevant specialist disciplines.

Dr Hunt the project leader can best be described as a resource economist who has done some work in fisheries economics at times (although he has repeatedly been referred to as a Marine Scientist by Darren Kindleysides the AMCS's Director); the "practical knowledge" of Australian fisheries that he and the AMCS materials cite was gained in South Australia in 1985 and 1986. The biographical information on the AMCS staff who contributed to the Guide, shown on their website www.amcs.org.au, shows even less fisheries or aquaculture expertise.

Quite a few of their assessments are poorly founded and many of the **Think Twice** recommendations are so vague and general they are of little use. For example, all trawl caught prawns are relegated to the *Think Twice* category although Australian trawlers are world leaders in sustainable harvesting, by-catch reduction and minimising environmental impacts and the major fisheries pass the Commonwealth's Environment Protection and Biodiversity Conservation Act assessment. Similarly, the *Think Twice* classification on all wild caught barramundi is also unwarranted. All shark species and hence all shark fillets are relegated to the **Say No** category although Australia has shark species that are not endangered by commercial fishing.

Furthermore fish stocks and fisheries management arrangements are dynamic, changing continually, but the AMCS Guide is only updated every

few years. If the AMCS has so much trouble getting it right how does it expect fishmongers and consumers to buy better?

As for the extensive technical literature consulted to develop the guide, Dr Hunt *et al* made great use of the Commonwealth's Fisheries Status Report 2009 but they did so in a very selective manner readily accepting all overfished type verdicts but ignoring the sustainability or improvements reported in other stocks. The indisputable continual progress on Australian fisheries management and sustainability reported in the annual Commonwealth and State reports is not reflected in AMCS Guide or website.

The AMCS not only shuns the positive assessments made by State and Commonwealth fisheries experts and aquaculture managers it completely ignores the existence of detailed transparent independent assessments made by reputable organisations such as the MSC (Marine Stewardship Council).

The Commonwealth's Fishery Status Report 2009 is cited 59 times in the AMCS web site list of "over 300 references to the information contained in the Guide", one NSW government report accounts for another 26 of the 300; and many other items are cited more than once.

So the purported extensive information source list actually only has some 100 different items (in what I counted as approximately 370 citations), approximately 60 are serious technical publications while the remainder are web site articles/links. That's not much scientific foundation for a Guide commenting on more than 100 species.

The Reference list on the AMCS web site is lacking in positive or good news reports, it favours outdated overseas negative/bad news reports; it includes Myers & Worm's 2003 paper with its pessimistic prognosis on global fisheries seven times but the recent 2009 paper by Worm, Ray Hilborn (a fisheries professor) and others, that points out that world fish stocks are actually improving, and not going to collapse by 2048 as suggested earlier by Worm, seems to have been ignored. It is certainly not included in the literature cited.

The AMCS's so called peer review is equally overstated and misleading: it is nothing more than a casual, non-transparent, mechanism whereby a handful of well meaning volunteers individually offered comment on what was essentially a *fait accompli*. Both reviewers (marine scientists) I spoke to commented that serious concerns they expressed about particular assessments were largely ignored. Dr Hunt and the AMCS staff had already made their assessments based on a subjective review of selected literature.

Darren Kindleysides (the AMCS's Director) has not responded to my emailed request to confirm his phone comment to me that the peer reviewers included an aquaculture specialist. I don't believe any Australian aquaculture specialist would endorse the overall negative tone about aquaculture. The many weaknesses in the AMCS processes account for its blanket negative assessment of cage aquaculture and its **Say No** conclusion on Tasmanian farmed salmon – a farming industry regarded as world's best practice by scientists and governments globally.

The Guide is a beautiful looking little booklet and on face value seems very useful and easy to use but I suspect few people have actually used it when shopping and fewer still have looked closely at the criteria or reference list on the web site. In the absence of a simple government guide (the Status

Reports are now 240+ pages) the Guide continues to get endorsement or recommendations from well-meaning people not aware of the true situation.

In short the AMCS avoids information that does not fit its worst case scenarios and continues to promote the latest edition of the Guide with exaggerated and unsubstantiated claims. It deliberately shuns engagement with the government fisheries or aquaculture managers, and the seafood industry, because it says it wants to remain totally independent, but other organisations producing guides here and overseas have no difficulty getting the latest information from the real experts without losing their independence.

I believe the AMCS is just a conservation organisation using the Guide and related alarmist publicity to strengthen its “eco warrior” image in its perennial competition with organisations like Greenpeace and WWF for donations from the Australian public (the AMCS’s major source of funding). It uses its so-called independence as a weapon in its fight for market share in the conservation/green “market”.

Contrast the AMCS approach with the considered, constructive efforts being made by the Australian Conservation Foundation in collaboration with government fisheries managers, the University of Technology Sydney and the seafood industry to guide consumers to more sustainable seafood choices (www.acfonline.org.au/seafood). In the USA, the WWF and the Monterey Bay Aquarium have also taken a constructive collaborative approach to producing guidance on sustainable seafood.

The unduly negative tone of the AMCS Guide and web site is not constructive nor helping anyone, not even the AMCS itself in the long run.

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