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Aquaculture certification authorities: A matter of trust

Over the last few issues I have covered the development of aquaculture certification standards. To complete the picture we really also need to take a look at the development of aquaculture *certification authorities* as well. In order to avoid getting bogged down in the problems that presently plague the development of credible aquaculture standards, which we have already covered, we need to travel forward in time to some future Earth where (we hope) that some widely accepted standards for major aquaculture commodities have been developed through a fair and transparent process and generally agreed on.

Many people think of aquaculture standards as 'green labels', however this is incorrect. Aquaculture standards are simply production specifications; they mean nothing unless they are accompanied by a credible certification process. The 'green label' is actually conferred by the *certification authority* that assures compliance with a given standard. When a consumer considers buying a certified product it is largely the credibility of the certification authority that is foremost in their mind. They probably won't know much about the content of the standard itself. So what makes a good certification authority?

The fundamental attribute of an effective certification authority is that they are trusted by all parties as a neutral and independent arbiter. It's that simple. The real business of any certification authority is actually *trust*, and it is this trust alone that confers credibility and recognition upon products that the authority certifies. In the context of aquaculture, this means that we (farmers, buyers, environmental groups, consumers and society at large) trust a certification authority to make a fair assessment as to whether farm production has complied with a particular standard or not.

To enjoy the trust of all sides, a certification authority must be unbiased and act in good faith. It cannot be a party or proponent in an application for certification, nor can it have any interest in the outcome. This is one of the principles of natural justice, expressed in the Latin maxim, *nemo iudex in causa sua* or "no man is permitted to be judge in his own cause".

Unfortunately, many of the aquaculture standards available today are 'self certified', meaning that the organisation that developed the standard also assesses compliance against that standard and decides whether to certify a product or not. In some cases the proponents of standards have sought to generate an air of credibility by designating an 'independent third party' as a certification authority, when in fact they are members of that authority or have some other interest in it. Both industry- and environment-led certification schemes have played this game, creating perceptions of bias and attracting heavy criticism. Such practices undermine confidence in certification, defeating the purpose of certification in the first place.

It is important to place certification authorities as distantly as possible from both the proponents of standards and applicants for certification, in order to preserve their role as trusted and independent arbiters. A certification authority that lacks the trust of important stakeholders is effectively useless.

Simon Wilkinson