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## Supporting Global Standard Setting for Sustainable Aquaculture

[Merrick Hoben](#)[David Plumb](#) December, 2009 CBI Reports - Winter 2009 CBI is working with World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to facilitate the development of global standards that address the key negative environmental and social impacts from this expanding industry.

Aquaculture is booming around the world. About half of the seafood we eat today is grown in a net, a pond, or a tank, and the percentage is growing quickly.

CBI is working with World Wildlife Fund (WWF) to facilitate the development of global standards that address the key negative environmental and social impacts from this expanding industry. The process, called the Aquaculture Dialogues, takes a consensus-based approach to creating credible, voluntary standards that will transform farm operations toward more sustainable production of salmon, shrimp, tilapia, mussels, and eight other species. More than 2,000 people, including farmers, conservationists, community activists, academics, and government officials, participate in the roundtable discussions, called "Dialogues."

The process is unique because of its global reach, its consensus-based decision making process that brings stakeholders together, its focus on metrics-based standards that measure actual impacts on the environment, and its high level of transparency. It provides a window into the many opportunities and challenges of developing voluntary standards that will have the ability to shift behavior in a global industry.

CBI is providing WWF overall guidance on the process, and facilitating dialogue and decision making in seven species-specific dialogues. Draft standards for three species are nearly complete, and the remainder are due out in 2010.

In the following, we reflect on some of our insights from this important work as it develops.



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## **I. Building Ownership**

WWF, the world's largest conservation organization, convened the Dialogues and coordinates them. For the standards to be successful in shifting industry practices, WWF can't be the only organization committed to them. Shared ownership of the process by Dialogue participants is critical in order to motivate farmers, environmental organizations, wholesalers and retailers to accept and support the standards. Shared ownership is also key to creating a credible certification scheme that is trusted by seafood buyers.

The decision making structure used by the Dialogues promotes this ownership and commitment. Most of the Dialogues are governed by a steering committee that includes a representation of key stakeholders. The steering committees approve the process by which the Dialogue will develop standards, and have a final say in what they look like. Many steering committees have weekly conference calls and come together periodically for multi-day sessions to develop indicators and standards based on input from a broader set of constituents and public meetings.

CBI's role as an impartial facilitator helps to create the space for greater ownership among stakeholders. WWF asked for CBI's help so that WWF staff could clarify and simplify their own involvement in the dialogues. Initially, WWF was coordinating, facilitating and acting as a stakeholder interested in specific outcomes. Now, WWF focuses on coordination and on active participation as a stakeholder, while CBI takes responsibility for impartially facilitating the dialogues. CBI's facilitation has helped ensure the process meets the needs of all participants, while freeing up WWF to concentrate on coordinating and promoting its conservation goals.

## **II. Applying a negotiation framework**

Standard-setting does not magically happen by bringing people together in a series of meetings. It is a negotiation between key stakeholders who have different world views and different interests. Using a negotiation framework that respects this dynamic has proven fundamental in moving the process forward.

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The Mutual Gains Approach to negotiation has guided CBI's support of the Dialogues. The approach assumes that people show up at a negotiating table with different interests and perspectives. The goal of the negotiation isn't to persuade everyone to think the same way, but rather to find creative solutions that help each party meet their goals and interests. This requires dialogue and a structured process to help people develop ideas, weigh options, make decisions that are perceived as fair and anticipate implementation challenges.

In a science-based process such as the Aquaculture Dialogues, a common tendency is to outsource tough decisions to technical working groups or scientists. CBI is helping the Dialogue participants to use an alternative approach: Joint Fact Finding (JFF). This approach does not assume that technical analysis can substitute for negotiation: Instead, JFF helps the groups first come to agreement on the technical questions that need to be answered to produce credible information for the group to work with, and on the methods and experts who will do the technical analysis on behalf of the group (see Consensus Building Handbook, chapter 9). Rather than asking technical experts to answer the tough policy (and often value-laden) questions and trade-offs inherent in a standard-setting process—such as the use and impact of GMOs in seafood—JFF asks the experts to answer questions that stakeholders agree can be addressed through a technical analysis, and then brings the results back to the stakeholders, who must decide how to use the information in light of their interests. CBI works with the Dialogue steering committees to address these decisions head-on by surfacing stakeholders' underlying values and beliefs and connecting them with best available science.

### **III. Reaching out early and often**

With 2,000 people participating, the WWF Aquaculture Dialogue process is the largest endeavor ever aimed at creating global standards for the aquaculture industry. The level of participation reflects the attention paid to outreach strategies in the Dialogues, and the importance of engaging key individuals and organizations when developing a global, voluntary standard.

Outreach ranges from an active Web and media presence to meetings with small-scale pangasius farmers in rural Vietnam, Thailand, and India. The objective is to ensure the process is firmly linked to those people and organizations that can help create a more informed standard, champion the process, or stand in its way. Among these stakeholders, seafood buyers—including supermarket chains and food service distributors—represent a key outreach target, as they play a leadership role

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in determining consumer choices. The Dialogues are focused on the three geographic regions that have the highest per capita consumption of seafood on a country-by-country basis: Asia, North America, and Europe. Several major buyers, such as Sysco and Whole Foods have participated in the Dialogue process.

#### **IV. Documenting clearly**

The Aquaculture Dialogues are inherently complicated, given their geographic scope, technical focus, and ambition. In addition, stakeholders enter the process at different stages and with different levels of expertise. This necessitates extremely clear process documentation to keep all parties up to speed, and to make the process accessible to newcomers.

Each Dialogue developed a process document that describes how participants make decisions and develop the standards. Meeting outcomes are captured in accessible summaries that include the rationale for decisions made. Documents are available online in multiple languages. During public comment periods, all feedback has been published on the Dialogue website, along with responses to the feedback and explanations of how and why the draft standards documents were revised to address the feedback.

#### **V. Balancing ownership with alignment**

The Aquaculture Dialogues have worked hard to build ownership among participants and, in particular, ownership by the steering committee for each species. The challenge created by this ownership goal is that WWF and some other global stakeholders want consistency across the standards for different species. For example, some stakeholders would like consistency across all the standards on issues such as the sustainable sourcing of feed products, or the ecosystem impacts of exotic species. As convener of the Dialogues, WWF is promoting information sharing across the Dialogues to create opportunities for cross-fertilization. Some issues warrant a more intensive effort to build alignment to ensure the standards as a package make sense and aren't viewed as arbitrary. WWF and CBI have developed a process to bring together "ambassadors" from each of the steering committees. We are facilitating dialogue among the ambassadors to maximize information sharing on critical cross cutting issues and find areas of alignment where deemed necessary by stakeholders themselves.

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## **Conclusion: The power of dialogue**

Dialogue participants are volunteering their time in this process to create a more sustainable future for aquaculture. While a great deal of hard work remains before the standards are finalized and begin functioning as a farm-based certification mechanism, the Dialogues are already changing the way some participants view each other and the challenges ahead.

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