

THE POLITICS OF EATING SUSTAINABLY: EXPLAINING ALTRUISM IN THE  
OCEAN WISE PROGRAM

by

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## Abstract

What motivates businesses to voluntarily join an eco-label and pledge to uphold standards over and above those required by the state? The academic literature has generally approached this question by analyzing the economic benefits a business derives from their participation. We can explain their behaviour because they are receiving economic benefits in the form of price premiums, brand equity or market share. The benefits can also come in the form of risk mitigation by designing your own environmental policy and choosing how to honour it, as opposed to having the government set up the rules. Critics point out that there is no assurance that businesses are capable of caring about anything beyond the bottom line of profits, and question the logic of letting businesses design and uphold environmental legislation in their own terms. This study takes a step back from this debate and seeks to better understand how those who sign onto eco-labels explain their activities to themselves. I pursue an interpretative methodology that focuses on understanding how agents make sense of their actions and their world. Based on a collection of interviews with the executive chefs of the restaurants that signed onto the Ocean Wise eco-label, I argue that altruism and the desire to do the right thing play a role in motivating beyond-compliance behaviour. I find that the chefs do not use the language of market-based benefits to explain why they are upholding stricter standards in sourcing sustainable seafood in their kitchens. Instead, they use the language of political action and personal responsibility to explain their involvement. By focusing on the role of self-explanations and showing how agents make sense of their involvement in an eco-label, I draw attention to the role altruism can play in motivating businesses to join private environmental initiatives like Ocean Wise.

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## Introduction

“It wasn't about the marketing for us. It's about the sea,” said Robert Clark, executive chef of C restaurant, two minutes into our interview when he explained why he sources sustainable seafood in his kitchen and joined the Ocean Wise eco-label. These days I often hear businesses use the language of protecting the environment; a large number of them pay at the very least lip service to the principles of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) and claim that their operations take into consideration their social and environmental impact. Furthermore, many of them are submitting their practices for review to third-party certifiers that enforce different and possibly tougher standards than the state. What motivates businesses to uphold environmental standards that are not required of them? Does it all make economic sense because of the price premiums they can expect from us customers if they promise to protect the environment? Or is it a sneaky move to appear environmentally conscious but not do anything of substance? Or perhaps they are trying to anticipate government legislation and design it in their own terms ahead of time? What should I make of Robert Clark's statement? Is it part of his business plan to cash in on the premiums consumers are willing to pay for sustainable seafood? Or is he trying to greenwash the image of his restaurant and defuse criticisms over the voracious appetite the restaurant industry has over seafood? Or is he motivated by a desire to protect the oceans? And, more importantly for this study, how does he explain his actions to himself?

Robert Clark leads the kitchen of the founding restaurant of Ocean Wise, a program

run by the Vancouver Aquarium that certifies restaurants that serve sustainable seafood. When restaurants join, the staff at the Aquarium reviews their menus and asks them to immediately replace one or two non-sustainable seafood items for alternatives deemed sustainable by them. After that, the restaurants pledge to continue replacing one menu item every six months. The Aquarium, in turn, allows the restaurants to use the Ocean Wise logo to highlight to their diners which items are sustainable. The program has proved very popular with the restaurant dining scene, with a large majority of Vancouver's seafood restaurants on board, and there is even a waiting list of restaurants waiting to join.

Ocean Wise falls under what the academic literature calls a “third-party certifier.” This means that businesses invite an external private party with their own set of standards to review their practices and verify if they comply with them. If they do, businesses can often market their products with the logo of the certifier. There are many examples of these initiatives in the marketplace—the Forest Stewardship Council, the Marine Stewardship Council, Certified Organic, Energy Star, etc. As more third-party certifiers appear in the marketplace, academics have tried to answer one of the most perplexing questions of this phenomenon—why? Why do businesses embrace standards over and above those demanded by the state? Why are they modifying their operations to comply with voluntary standards? The literature on the subject can be broadly divided into two camps. The first houses studies that seek to uncover an underlying economic rationale to explain why businesses agree to standards beyond those demanded by the state (this is sometimes referred to as “beyond-compliance”). Research in this camp usually start with the assumption that there is an economic explanation for the behaviour of these firms, and it is the task of the researcher to

elucidate it. The argument goes that a company might benefit from price premiums, brand equity, market share, averting stricter legislation from government, choosing your own environmental legislation, etc., in return for adhering to stricter private standards. Researchers in this camp tend to be optimistic about giving businesses greater flexibility in honouring their environmental commitments and to give them a chance to reap market benefits for their efforts. This side of the debate also houses a range of studies that show how eco-labels operate in the marketplace and the extent to which consumers react to them (and are willing to pay the price premiums from which a company would benefit). In the second camp we find studies that are more skeptical of the rise of private environmental governance. These researchers question the logic behind allowing companies to embrace environmental regulation in their own terms, and also question whether the private sector is truly capable of being socially and environmentally responsible. Studies in this camp tend to be more pessimistic about the ability of business to respond to the environmental needs of society, and would argue that they could be greenwashing their image with the greenspeak of CSR.

This study takes a step back from the two camps and seeks to question some of the assumptions that currently frame the “why” debate of private environmental governance. Rather than uncovering the underlying business rationale of those involved or unmasking the true face of business, I focus on how those who participate in beyond-compliance initiatives explain their activities to themselves. I use the case of Ocean Wise to illustrate how individuals who sign on to a third-party certifier make sense of their own actions and suggest that the chefs of Ocean Wise frame their understanding of why they are involved in a private beyond-compliance initiative in the language of altruism, political action and the desire to do



the right thing. They seek to challenge their consumers to make responsible seafood choices and promote awareness so that the public knows which seafoods are ok to eat. They are risking lower profit margins and more complicated supply chains to help preserve the oceans and re-educate their customers in their eating habits and skew them away from non-sustainable choices. Their self-stated aim is to raise a generation of consumers aware of the plight of the oceans, and knowledgeable about seafood issues. "I would say that mainstream culture has become more savvy and more aware of issues that we've been putting out on a regular basis," said Aron Bjornson from Capers Community Market. Even though there might be an economic calculation and rational expectations behind their involvement, this does not mean that they understand their activities in those terms. Rather, this paper makes the case that their self-understanding of why they are involved in Ocean Wise partly differs from the economic explanations the theoretical literature has put forward for why businesses join eco-labels. The interpretation they provided of their activities places a strong emphasis on altruism, and I argue through their case that the theoretical literature might be underplaying the role it can have in motivating beyond-compliance behaviour.

My research is based on a collection of semi-structured, open-ended interviews with the executive chefs of several of the restaurants involved in Ocean Wise. I identified my subjects via their websites; Ocean Wise maintains a list of links to the webpages of the participating restaurants, and I searched for the contact information of the executive chefs and requested interviews. I secured interviews with nine chefs, but some of the chefs headed more than one restaurant in the program, so this covered 14 restaurants. When I began this study, there were 30 participating restaurants, so my interviews covered almost half of the

possible sample. In the meantime, however, Ocean Wise expanded and there are now 41 affiliated restaurants. There are also a few restaurants outside the city of Vancouver in places like Abbotsford, White Rock, Vancouver Island and Whistler, but due to financial and time constraints, I could not include them in the study. In addition to the interviews with the chefs, I interviewed a representative from Capers, the only retail store in the program, and the dean of the Pacific Institute of Culinary arts, the only affiliated cooking school. Finally, I also interviewed the program coordinator at the Vancouver Aquarium. The interviews were all held at the restaurants or at their offices, with the exception of two that happened over the phone and one via email. I took Pierre Bourdieu's (1999) insights on structuring interviews, and tried my best to set up a relationship and an environment where my interviewees would feel comfortable sharing their thoughts. I have no reason to believe that any of them purposefully tried to mislead me.

When I began the interviews, I expected long discussions with the chefs about brand equity, price premiums, market share and the other economic outcomes I came to expect from my survey of the literature on eco-labeling. I hoped to focus my interviews on the economic benefits that the restaurants received or expected to derive from their adherence to the Ocean Wise guidelines. What I found instead was that nobody was interested in talking about this. No matter how hard I poked at their business case, our conversations invariably gravitated towards the chefs' personal philosophies, the challenges of convincing customers to try new seafood items and the challenges of sourcing sustainable seafood in an affordable manner. By and large, the chefs reported that they were not reaping the benefits of brand equity or price premiums that an eco-label might command. Instead, their involvement with

Ocean Wise seemed at best to be a nuisance for their businesses, making their sourcing practices more complicated, more expensive, and restricting the availability of ingredients to create their menus. Tim Muelhbauer from O'Douls Restaurant commented that it is “a challenge [foregoing profit for sustainability]—the products that we can use are more expensive...It's tough, and you won't make the same profits and the profit margin shrinks yet again.”

If joining Ocean Wise makes the life of these chefs harder and puts clamps on the profit potential of the restaurants, then why are they doing it? This study suggests that the chefs' self-understanding of why they joined Ocean Wise places a strong emphasis on “doing the right thing.” They shared a common vision that there is something wrong with the way the oceans are being managed, and that they, as seafood purveyors, bear a responsibility to do their bit in alleviating some of those problems. They saw themselves as members of a group of restaurants that, in collaboration with the Aquarium, are trying to raise awareness on the need to preserve the oceans, challenge our seafood eating habits and educate us on how to make sustainable choices. This study follows Elizabeth Barham's (2002) call to think of eco-labeling, or as she prefers to call it, values-based labeling, as a form of political activity. Barham argues that values-based labeling initiatives, such as Ocean Wise, transpose debates usually confined to the political arena onto the marketplace. I suggest that the chefs' self-understanding of why they joined a third-party certification program is closer to Barham's argument rather than the economic approach that understands business's involvement through the lenses of market benefits and mechanisms. Their self-stated goals were framed in the language of political action—a disdain for the ability of governments to control the

extraction of marine resources, a discourse of personal responsibility as seafood purveyors to help the oceans and the need to educate consumers on how to make more sustainable choices.

In order to arrive at these results, my research takes a less-explored path to the “why” question in private environmental governance, and is underpinned by two assumptions that I make about the study of politics. The first is that we can never know for certain what other people are thinking—we cannot get into their heads. When we write about the behaviour of people, about the structures they create and the ways in which they interact with them, we cannot know for certain what they were thinking. What we can do is to ask what agents understand themselves to be doing. How do they make sense of their own actions, and how do they explain the world around them? Charles Taylor elaborates on what an interpretative approach to social science, such as the one that I propose here, entails:

In fact my thesis amounts to an alternative statement of the main proposition of interpretative social science, that an adequate account of human action must make the agents more understandable. On this view, it cannot be a sufficient objective of social theory that it just predict, or allow us to derive, the actual pattern of social or historical events, and the regularities which occur in it, described in whatever language admits of unambiguous verification. A satisfactory explanation must also make sense of the agents. This is not to say, of course, that it must show their action as making sense. For it very often does not. Frequently they are confused, malinformed, contradictory in their own goals and actions. But in identifying the contradictions, confusions, etc., we make sense of what they did. And this means that we come to see how as *agents*—i.e. beings who act, have purposes, desires—they came to do what they did, and to bring about what befell. (Taylor 1985, 116-117; emphasis in original)

I follow Charles Taylor's proposition and others such as Clifford Geertz (2001) to argue that the study of politics includes investigating what people understand themselves to

be doing. In doing this, we talk with them, we hear their explanations, we juxtapose them with outcomes and structural forces, and finally put forward our *interpretation* of the forces at play. The trick, according to Geertz, is “to figure out what the devil they think they are up to” (1983: 58). In pursuing an interpretative approach, we have to take into account that people often act on incomplete information and with a limited ability to process everything that shapes and constrains their environment. Even if the self-explanation they provide seems illogical or misinformed, the goal of an interpretative approach is to understand the way agents see their own world. In doing this, we can get a better understanding of those who seek to challenge and transform the world we inhabit.

My second cue is taken from the feminist tradition of political studies, which takes as one of its axioms that the personal is political. I take this to mean that the aggregate of personal experiences can tell us something about the political world we inhabit. Personal stories may embody and reflect the larger political forces at work in society, and through these stories we can gain a glimpse of how agents are affected and also how they go about challenging and modifying them.

I have to admit to case selection bias on my part. When I came across this topic, I was excited to find a new eco-label that innovated on the consumer-oriented approach of other sustainable seafood initiatives (I will have more to say on this in the second chapter). I was drawn to the topic, and eager to find out the story behind it—why and how did these people start collaborating? It also seemed important to pursue this topic further as an anomaly in the seafood eco-labeling movement, but one that could be a productive anomaly. However, I

must concede that because of my selection bias, my results are limited to identifying features that could also be present in other similar phenomena (Gerring 2004; Ragin 1997). I do not aspire to generalize the results of this study; my aims are much more modest. I would be content if my findings reveal through an interpretative approach how a particular economic sector that has been relatively understudied (chefs) explain their endorsement of environmental voluntary agreements.

This paper is divided into three sections. First I offer a review of the existing theoretical literature on private environmental governance, eco-labeling and political consumerism. The purpose of this chapter is to introduce the reader to the debates in which this study is situated. I cover a wide range of studies that try to make sense of the effectiveness, origins and implications of private environmental governance. I start by looking at studies that come primarily from economics, which focus on understanding the mechanics of eco-labels. This body of literature tries to answer the questions of when and how consumers react to eco-labels and how big of a price premium we are willing to pay for them. They show consumers would be willing to pay a price premium for several eco-labeled products. These works are framed by an underlying approach to study eco-labels as market mechanisms. I turn in the second section of this chapter to critiques of this economic approach and review the work of academics working in the field of political consumerism. I show the case for thinking about eco-labels as more than just market mechanisms, but also as conduits for political ideology and activism in the marketplace. The chapter then turns its attention to a discussion of the origins and implications of private environmental governance. After providing a historical account, I focus on how the literature has tried to answer the

“why” question. I show that the debate has been framed around either uncovering the business logic behind it or uncovering how businesses are deceiving us by greenwashing their image. I conclude this section with a review of the few studies that operationalized altruism as a possible variable in explaining beyond-compliance behaviour.

The second chapter introduces a historical overview of ocean management and the rise of private initiatives to protect marine resources. The purpose of this section is twofold. First, I provide an overview of the state of the oceans and the attempts to manage their resources. I do this to provide the reader with a sense of why the chefs felt compelled to take action and join an initiative like Ocean Wise (and in my interviews it became readily apparent that the chefs were well informed about the status of the oceans). I show how states have (mis)managed marine resources, and illustrate how seafood consumption has increased in North America. The second section focuses on the mechanics of Ocean Wise. I introduce the program in full detail and give the necessary information to understand what the program asks of the chefs, and what they get in return. This section provides the background information of the participating restaurants, and also compares and contrast Ocean Wise to other eco-labels that certify marine products. I show that Ocean Wise introduces an innovation to seafood eco-labeling by focusing on the restaurant industry rather than retail purchases. Given that almost 70 percent of all seafood consumed in North America happens in restaurants, this could be an important innovation in seafood eco-labeling.

The third section is dedicated to the self-explanations of the chefs for participating in Ocean Wise. I show that the chefs partly explain their actions with what I call the “discourse

of personal responsibility.” Many of my interviewees said that their operations go through such large amounts of seafood that they feel a personal commitment to do their bit to protect the oceans and use their restaurants to educate the public at large on seafood issues. I conclude this chapter with a discussion of the challenges that the chefs face when making the commitment to serve sustainable seafood. Many of them also felt that their sourcing practices became more complicated, the new products they are allowed to use are more expensive, and the range of products at their disposal to create their menus decreased. Furthermore, it takes time and steadfastness to help their clientele understand why they will not serve seafood that is available at other restaurants not participating in initiatives like Ocean Wise. By and large, involvement in Ocean Wise did not seem to provide them with any immediate material benefits, but was rather making their lives more complicated. Instead of using the language of market benefits, this chapter shows that the chefs explain their involvement in Ocean Wise through the language of altruism and political action.

The conclusion returns to the theoretical questions raised in this introduction and the theoretical chapter that follows, and argues for a reconsideration of the role of altruism in motivating beyond-compliance practices. I argue that if we set aside the economic assumptions about eco-labeling and pursue an interpretative approach, altruism can partly explain why businesses join the bandwagon of private environmental governance and eco-labeling.



## Theoretical Overview

I believe that a more concerted effort to research labelling *as a social movement* is both timely and needed.

*Barham 2002: 358; emphasis in original*

The literature on private environmental governance and eco-labeling is expanding at a rapid pace as more and more programs appear in the marketplace. The literature spans across disciplines, and scholars in the fields of economics, geography, business, sociology and political science have tried to make sense of this new form of market-based governance. Whether eco-labeling is an effective way to address environmental problems is a question that is up for debate; endorsers of private governance believe that allowing companies to reap the market benefits of complying with tougher standards might make environmental management more efficient (Gunningham, Grabosky and Sinclair 1998). Critics like Maniates (2001) worry that private governance might lure us with a false sense of security, greenwash the image of corporations and promote increased consumption in a world of finite resources. On a different point, Barham (2002) argues that eco-labels are a first step in politicizing the marketplace. Through them, a whole set of values that are usually left outside market exchanges start framing our monetary exchanges and imbue our transactions with political meaning.

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical debates to which this study is geared towards. It begins with an exploration of the literature on eco-labeling. Within this branch we find studies that try to determine our willingness as consumers to endorse eco-

labeled products and whether we would pay a premium for them or not. These researchers have also tried to refine the profile of those who are most likely to purchase eco-labeled products. These studies come primarily from economics and are concerned with the mechanics of how eco-labels operate in the marketplace. I then turn to a critique of this approach and review studies that encourage us to not look at eco-labeling as a market device but rather as a form of political activity that uses the marketplace as its arena. Next I offer a discussion of the rise of private governance and explore the implications of shifting governance to the private sector. The section leads to an overview of how researchers have accounted for why businesses are endorsing private environmental governance that demands beyond-compliance standards from them. I show that the explanations are dominated by either an economistic view that seeks to explain how eco-labeling makes sense from a business point of view, or by a skeptical view of the ability of businesses to respond to any concerns beyond the profit motive. I conclude with an overview of the few studies that have focused on the role altruism plays in motivating beyond-compliance behaviour. I argue that the role of altruism and the potential of understanding eco-labeling as a political movement have been understudied.

## **Eco-labeling**

One of the main questions animating the literature on eco-labeling is the extent to which consumers are willing to choose environmentally-friendly products over their conventional counterparts (Moon et. al. 2002). Thus far, the literature has found that for certain products consumers are willing to choose an eco-labeled product over its

counterparts. Teisl, Roe and Hicks (2002), find evidence in the supermarket sector of the United States that the dolphin-friendly logo on tuna cans had a statistically significant impact to cause consumers to choose labeled cans over their alternatives. Jaffry et. al (2004) test in the UK whether eco-labels promising either quality or sustainability in seafood affect the choice of consumers, and find that eco-labels promising sustainability have a higher chance of influencing consumer behaviour. Interestingly enough, consumers are more likely to be persuaded by sustainably-labeled cod than salmon. Wessells, Johnston and Donath (1999) find the same relationship for cod over salmon in the US market, but with the added twist that everything else being equal, shoppers are more likely to choose certified seafood if it is fresh rather than frozen<sup>1</sup> (Wessells, Johnston and Donath 1999). However, would consumers be willing to pay a price premium for eco-labeled products? Studies from the forestry sector show that North American consumers would be willing to pay extra for certified wood products (Sedjo and Swallow 2002; Forsyth, Haley and Kozak 1999). Bjorner, Hansen and Russell (2004) find that Danish consumers would pay a 13-18% premium for toilet paper certified by the Nordic Swan eco-label.

The literature has also tried to gain a better picture of those who are most likely to purchase eco-labeled products. Loureiro, McCluskey and Mittelhammer (2001) show in their analysis of shoppers in Oregon that having children under the age of 18 living in the household and high food safety concerns increases the likelihood of purchasing certified-organic apples. In a review of the literature for the United States, Thompson (1998) finds that

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<sup>1</sup> This finding has great implications for the Marine Stewardship Council. Unilever, the main distributor of MSC-certified seafood, does its business primarily in frozen products.

variables such as age, marital status, number and age of children and educational attainment are the most important predictors for identifying certified-organic consumers. For St. Paul shoppers, Robinson and Smith (2003) find that health conscious consumers, who tend to be older, better educated, and more affluent, are more likely to purchase sustainable products. Olsen (2003) also argues that age is a good indicator of seafood consumption; older people tend to eat seafood more frequently. In a study specific to eco-labeled seafood in the United States, the authors find that gender (women in this case) is the only demographic variable that is significant enough to predict sustainable seafood purchases (Wessells, Johnston and Donath 1999). An interesting finding in regards to income is that truly sporadic consumers are more likely to purchase eco-labeled seafood over consumers who purchase a little bit of seafood on a regular basis (and affluent regular consumers are the most likely to purchase it on an ongoing basis). A final piece of information that could shape consumer behaviour is if retailers provided information about the origin and date of catch of seafood. Jaffry et. al (2004) found in the UK that if consumers were given that information, it would tip their purchases towards local products. In a survey of Rhode Island residents, Wessells and Anderson (1995) found that they would be willing to pay up to 10% extra per pound for a catch date assurance.

One of the challenges of studying eco-labels and food is that it is not easy to determine whether consumers are endorsing them because of their environmental qualities or for their health promises. DuPuis (2000) argues that the dramatic growth of the market in organic dairy products is driven primarily by health concerns; consumers worried about the effects of rBGH on their bodies are switching to organic milk. The improved living

conditions of the cows or the smaller environmental impact of the dairy farms seem to be less relevant factors than health concerns in accounting for the rise of organic dairy products. In the case of organic produce we see a similar dynamic at work, where consumers in the United States and Western Europe claim that health concerns over the use of pesticides are as relevant a factor in motivating the purchase as environmental concerns (Russell, Krarup and Clark, 2005; Wier, Andersen and Millock 2005). To complicate matters, most food eco-labels are designed to highlight their products at grocery stores. Grocery shopping can indeed be a daunting experience, and even more so for the politically-minded consumer. Research done in the United States shows that consumers make up to 2/3 of all purchasing decisions inside the store. With the average consumer making one major shopping trip per week, this means that they have to survey the 15,000 plus products the average store carries for products that meet their health, taste, price and other criterias. Moreover, most people dislike buying groceries so their disposition to react to eco-labels is further hampered (Caswell and Padberg 1992).

A final point of interest before moving on to the next section of this theoretical overview is research done on how we choose menu items at restaurants. Wansink, van Ittersum and Painter (2005) examine if the way in which a menu is written affects the choice of the patrons at a cafeteria, and find that evocative writing tilts consumer choice. Cultural theorist Pierre Bourdieu analyzes the role of dining out in setting classes apart. He focuses on the role of cultural capital in allowing the educated classes to consume and appreciate the offerings of a high-end dining establishment and thus distinguish themselves from less educated people (Bourdieu 1984). Rauniyar, Herrman and Hanson find that restaurant

patrons are more likely to consume seafood at restaurants if their income is above US\$40,000/year and live in urban centers (in Hanson, Herrmann and Dunn 1995). There are also works primarily in sociology that analyze the cultural dimensions of eating out in the United States (Finkelstein 1989) and in the UK (Warde and Martens 2000). To the best of my knowledge, however, there is no research yet that examines whether and how consumers react to sustainable offerings in restaurant menus. There is a trend though in high-end restaurants to highlight the ecological soundness of their ingredients (organic, free-range), and in some cases even the farms or locations that supply their produce. Chef Alice Water's restaurant "Chez Panisse" in California was a pioneer in the United States in highlighting the organic farms that supplied the products for her menus.

### **Values and Labels**

Elizabeth Barham proposes to shift the language away from eco-labels and towards "values-based labelling" (2002). She reasons that the new term encapsulates better all the dimensions behind eco-labels, which are not restricted only to environmental concerns or economic considerations. The new terminology is designed to incorporate initiatives like the fair-trade movement, and serve as an analytical lens for ethical consumerism.

Barham draws on the work of Karl Polanyi, and Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, to argue that the capitalist market place obscures the process by which commodities are produced. When a commodity is assigned a monetary value, it takes precedence over the process by which the commodity was made. The consumer only interacts

with the monetary value of the commodity, and does not come into contact with the production process; commodity fetishism erects a wall between consumer and production. Values-based labelling is a form of resistance that imbues the commodity once again with a sense of process. The label brings to light the production process to consumers that would be absent otherwise (Allen and Kovach 2000).

Barham however takes the notion of values-based labelling further. She sees the rise of values-based labelling not just as a market mechanism to sell more products to people with a conscience (and charge more for them), but rather as the expression of political activity. For her, values-based labelling is a first step towards a politicized marketplace, where consumption choices are embedded in norms that usually lie outside the market.

Although organizations involved in values-based labelling take the market as their platform for action, (...) there is still a sense in which their activity can be seen as explicitly political. (...) Thus to propose that pre-existing shared social norms (such as fairness) as well as newly proposed social norms (for example, respect for animal rights) should be taken into account in economic markets for agro-food products as we know them is clearly, to my view, political. (2002:354)

Barham's arguments are echoed by Micheletti, Follesdale and Stolle, who argue that

we cannot (...) simply pursue rational self-interest goals in our market transactions. The ideal-type Egoistic Economic Man must be modified to an ideal-type Responsibility-Taking Political Consumer, who applies values other than purely self-interested economic ones in consumer choice situations. (Micheletti, Follesdal and Stolle 2004: xiv)

Although Micheletti, Follesdale and Stolle recognize that there is scepticism about

both the effectiveness and desirability to address political issues via the marketplace, their work and that of their contributors is framed by a recognition that the marketplace can and is an important site for political activity, and we should take it seriously. As I will show in later chapters, those endorsing the Ocean Wise eco-label are closer to this political view of eco-labeling than the economistic view I previously outlined.

### **Private Environmental Governance**

The most basic feature of private governance is the minimal role the state plays in setting the rules and enforcing compliance. Under the Westphalian order, states have a monopoly over the authority to enforce the laws they enact. The last couple of decades, however, have witnessed a rise in private environmental governance (Falkner 2003). Somewhat surprisingly, the big players of the business world have started paying at the very least lip service to the triple bottom line of CSR—the purpose of their businesses is no longer just serving the bottom line (profits) but also measuring and taking into account their environmental and social impact. To keep track of their progress, many companies publish reports on their environmental practices, set beyond-compliance targets for themselves and claim to be improving their impact on their surroundings. In several sectors of the economy, private companies have joined associations to promote CSR like the UN Global Compact or subscribed to third-party certification programs such as the Forestry Stewardship Council, Certified Organic or the Marine Stewardship Council. These codes are arising in a wide range of sectors ranging from cars to appliances, emissions, forests and fisheries. The certifiers rely on companies to voluntarily abide by their codes. “Private authority is



considered to be different from public authority, because the latter derives mainly from the possibility of coercion, whereas the former is based on persuasion," says Pattberg (2004:9)

Hall and Bierkstekker note that:

While these new actors are not states, are not state-based, and do not rely exclusively on the actions or explicit support of states in the international arena, they often convey and/or appear to have been accorded some form of legitimate authority. That is, they perform the role of authorship over some important issue or domain. They claim to be, perform as, and are recognized as legitimate by some larger public (that often includes states themselves) as authors of policies, of practices, of rules, and of norms. (...) In short, they do many of the things traditionally, and exclusively, associated with the state (1999:4)

Cashore and Vertinski (2000) argue that government bureaucrats embraced private governance with an open mind in the 1980s, when they were faced with limited resources and greater pressure from the public to act. Finding themselves in a catch-22 situation, they turned to private governance as a way out. Moreover, the global spread of neoliberal ideology with its suspicion of governmental intervention has further opened the doors to market-based solutions to environmental problems; the ascent of the lean neoliberal state opened the necessary spaces for new actors to take up governance tasks. Alongside these developments, major environmental NGOs, most prominently the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), have joined the bandwagon of private environmental governance and have partnered with industry to set up third-party certifiers like the Forestry and the Marine Stewardship Council. Falkner (2003) offers three explanations for the rise of private environmental governance: The first is similar to that of Cashore and Vertinski's account and argues that the retreat of the state under neoliberalism has opened the space for private actors to emerge. The second is that private

environmental governance has emerged due to the pressure of global civil society. Activists have organized globally to challenge the power of MNCs, and private environmental governance is the response to their pressure. Finally, Falkner offers a Gramscian reading, and suggests that the dominant capitalist classes are spreading their hegemonic view of the world through the means of private environmental governance. There is no consensus on whether we should embrace these developments with an open mind (Cashore, Auld and Newsom 2004), or be suspicious about the implications of shifting governance to the private sector (Clapp 1998). Regardless of one's position, understanding the development of private governance is crucial because, depending on its impact and success, it might come to be seen by private actors as a more legitimate form of drawing up policy than traditional state-based rules.

The implications of the trend towards private environmental governance are a matter of heated debate (Harrison 2001; Haufler 2001; Hall and Biersteker 2002; Cutler, Haufler and Porter 1999; Paterson, Humphreys and Pettiford 2003; Bernstein 2002; Falkner 2003; Clapp 2005; Clapp 1998; Paterson 1999; Pattberg 2004). On the one hand, participating companies can benefit from the public recognition they will receive, and expand their market share or charge higher prices for their products. Consumers might be changing as well, and have started demanding that their companies produce goods that are not just cheap but also ethically produced. The growth in certified-organic and fair-trade sales is a reminder to the private sector that there is money to be made from being socially and environmentally responsible. Furthermore, committed big players in an industry can have enough leverage to make substantial changes to the market. This is sometimes referred to as a "race to the top."

For example, if a company like Starbucks commits itself to buying organic coffee, and Starbucks buys about 60 percent of Costa Rica's production (Economist 2006), this sends a message to Costa Rican producers that if they want to participate in the market, they must adhere to stricter environmental standards. Garcia-Johnson shows that US chemical companies upheld tougher standards than those required by their host countries when they opened factories in Mexico and Brazil. (2000). Endorsers of market-based solutions suggest that environmental performance could increase because companies will see that their practices have market returns and this will encourage them further in their efforts (Cashore, Auld and Newsom 2004:5). Andrews argues that the new technologies implemented through private self-regulation might increase the efficiency of the production process and save money to a company (1998). Dowell, Hart and Yeung (2000) find in an analysis of US Standard and Poor's list of 500 corporations that there is a significant and positive relationship between market value and the level of environmental standards a company uses.

On the other hand, there is absolutely no assurance that what a company claims to be good for the environment is actually good. Private governance allows companies to adhere to environmental codes on their own terms. CSR-speak can be just empty rhetoric and amount to little more than greenwashing the image of a company (Clapp 2005). By regulating their own behaviour, private companies could be forestalling government intervention. They can show that they do not need the government to come in and tell them what to do. This way, they can ensure that whatever change happens, happens on their terms (Haufler 2001). Moreover, critics like Bakan (2004) point out that corporations are unable to be accountable to anyone but their shareholders who usually care only about profits, regardless of their

environmental impact. Andrews (1998) makes a similar case when he points out that privately-held businesses have an easier time signing on to private environmental initiatives than publicly-traded companies. Promoting a race to the top in environmental governance through private parties could also be a new form of protectionism by Northern companies. Critics of the Marine Stewardship Council argue that the initiative is just another form of Northern "eco-imperialism," and that the structure tends to favour large commercial operations in disregard of the smaller operations found in Southern countries who will find themselves alienated from the market (Constance and Bonanno 2000).

### **Motivations**

One of the least understood questions in the literature on voluntary environmental management is also one that is at the crux of the subject matter: Why? While it seems like such an obvious question to ask from companies that subscribe to voluntary agreements—why are you doing this?—it is a surprisingly hard question to answer.

Haufler (2001) approaches the "why" question from a risk point of view. She argues that the private sector sees government regulation as a potential risk, especially from MNCs who see the likelihood of international agreements to regulate their behaviour as fraught with risk. Moreover, activist pressure is also a potential risk for their brand equity. Private governance is a way for the private sector to mitigate and avert these risks by regulating themselves before there is substantial pressure to do so from external sources that they do not control. The Economist also argues in favour of seeing private environmental governance

through the eyes of risk mitigation. They say:

Why is business suddenly coming over all politically correct? Don't think for a moment that businessmen have suddenly become angels. But an important change is under way in the boardrooms and C-suites of many of the world's leading companies, as to how directors and bosses think about their firm's self-interest. For most of us, virtue is its own reward. But for a growing number of companies, virtue looks more like the route to better long-term profits. Old-style woolly corporate social responsibility (CSR) is being replaced by a harder-headed enlightened self-interest. Business people may still feel obliged to use the language of CSR—which few of them actually believed, though they hoped it would deflect fire from politicians and non-governmental organisations. But increasingly, they view big political and social trends through the lenses of risk-management and profit opportunity. (Economist 2006b)

When I reviewed the literature on this subject, one of the most common assumptions I found was that there must be a profit motive or some other rational expectation on the part of firms to participate in voluntary agreements. That is, the only way in which we can make sense of the beyond-compliance behaviour of the private sector is that they are reaping some material benefits from it. These benefits can take the form of new markets, brand equity, risk mitigation, keeping your customers alive, etc. In a survey article of the literature, Khanna argues that “Studies analyzing environmental self-regulation by firms continue to assume that a voluntary agreement, while facilitating voluntary action with a desirable social outcome, is undertaken by firms based on their self-interest (Khanna 2001:298). Cashore, Auld and Newsom built a four-variable framework to understand market-driven governance but out of the four categories, they argue that the role of the market is the most important feature in understanding of market-driven governance. Because the market plays such a central role to market-driven governance, this “means that for companies along the supply chain to support

non-state market-driven governance systems they must evaluate them as providing some kind of economic benefit, either direct or indirect” (Cashore, Auld and Newsom 2004:23). Kirchhoff (2000) shows that companies will endorse third-party certification when this presents them with the possibility of discovering other companies that are falsely claiming to produce environmental goods. Moreover, a third-party certifier avoids the company the risk of being accused of green-wash. In another major study of private environmental governance, Steger argues straight out that: “We worked on the central assumption that companies, as predominantly economic entities, will make significant efforts only if they have a business reason for so doing and are able to build and communicate a business case” (Steger 2004: xvii).

Something that does not appear often in the literature is a serious consideration of the role altruism can play in motivating a business to endorse private environmental standards. Kennedy was one of the few researchers who framed his analysis of green marketing in the United Kingdom differently and found that :

in recent years the rise of green/ethical businesses has revealed not just a willingness to become involved in non-economic, even political, activity to a much greater extent than before, but a tendency for some businesses to become key agents of cultural and political change in their own right. (Kennedy 2004:21)

In his analysis, he makes a distinction between “mainstream” and “radical” companies. Mainstream companies are privately owned, with professional hierarchies, unequal remuneration structures and green/ethical business is but one more aspect of their operations. In contrast, the radical companies give ethical considerations a similar amount of

attention than profits, have more democratic internal structures and have smaller pay differentials (2004:31-32).

Given the basic distinction that sets radical companies apart, it should come as no surprise that Kennedy finds that they are acting as agents of cultural change via the market place. However, he finds that these companies suffer from a contradiction in purpose because “prioritizing the campaign becomes self-defeating, because marginality in the market or economic failure may cripple or remove the very vehicle for conducting the campaign in the first place” (2004:40). As he points out, “the marriage of profit with principle is an uneasy one” (2004:35). In contrast, Kennedy finds it surprising that mainstream companies could combine political and educational functions with their profit goals, and attributes this to wider cultural changes to which the companies are responding. Cashore, Auld and Newsom make a similar argument, when they suggest that the Forestry Stewardship Council tends to be supported by a core-group of companies that do it for values-based reasons rather than economical (although they do not pursue this line of argument in depth) (2004:24). In an analysis of Costa Rican hotel managers who endorsed tougher environmental standards for their businesses, Rivera and De Leon (2005) found that among those with a background in environmental studies, the rationale they gave for their behaviour was that it was the right thing to do. Wiser, Fowlie and Holt operationalize the role of altruism in their analysis of demand for green power in the United States. They argue that

Altruism as a key motivation is dismissed by some observers of corporate environmentalism and traditional models of firm behavior assume a profit-maximizing firm that cares little for purely altruistic investments. Despite a dearth of

empirical evidence, we suspect that admitting that altruism exists among individuals who work within organizations, but failing to consider altruism as a potential motivation for organizations themselves, is premature. Accordingly, we view altruistic concern for the environment as worthy of empirical investigation and in need of further attention in the theoretical literature. (2001: 1088)

This study elaborates on the need for further attention to the role of altruism in private environmental management, and I will later show the role it played in swaying a number of chefs in Vancouver to sign on to the Ocean Wise initiative.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the theoretical literature that frame the empirics of this study. With a few exceptions, the literature has understudied the potential role of altruism in affecting a business's decision to join the bandwagon of private environmental governance. I showed that on the one hand, we find a wide range of studies focusing on the market mechanisms under which an eco-label operates. Most of them assume the existence of an eco-label, and are more concerned with understanding their impact on consumer choice. I also showed that some of the major works that try to answer the "why" question start from the assumption that there is an economic rationale underlying a business's participation in one of these programs.

On the other hand, I introduced a range of works that challenge these assumptions. They encourage us to see eco-labeling as more than market mechanisms, and to treat it as a form of political activism. I also introduced the few studies that operationalized altruism as a



potential variable in accounting for beyond-compliance behaviour, and noted together with them that the role altruism plays has been understudied and we need to pay more attention to it. I will now turn my attention to the state of the oceans and lay out the conditions that made the chefs of Ocean Wise feel that they had to take action.

## **The Oceans and our Attempts not to eat them Away**

Governance of the oceans has historically been difficult. However, figuring out who was entitled to what fish was not a major ecological issue until humans developed their fishing techniques to a point where we could decimate the oceans at will. Further to that, it is particularly challenging for governments to comprehensively monitor what is being taken from the areas where they exercise sovereignty—overshot quotas and illegal fishing are common stories of the global fisheries. This chapter sets up the historical background in which Ocean Wise arises. The purpose is to lay out the context to which the chefs of Ocean Wise are responding; why do they feel that there is something wrong with the way seafood extraction is happening? I first survey the attempts by states to control and monitor what is being extracted from their coasts. Next, I turn my attention to a range of private initiatives that seek to either impose tighter standards on the management of fisheries or to change consumer consumption habits away from threatened species. Finally, I turn this chapter into an introduction to Ocean Wise and then explain the program in full detail and what makes it an innovative form of seafood eco-labeling.

### **Ocean Governance in a Nutshell**

Since at least the 17<sup>th</sup> century the oceans have been regulated by the principle of *mare liberum*, or freedom of the seas (Vogler 2000:44-45). This legal concept gives nations sovereignty over a small strip of sea close to their coasts, while leaving the open oceans as an

open-access commons (Hardin 1968). What this meant is that nobody could own fish still living in the oceans but they would become your private property if you could catch them. The open access regime was a recipe for disaster because there was no incentive to stop catching fish. If you failed to catch a fish and turn it into your private property, somebody else would. Showing restraint would amount to leaving the door open for other people to free-ride your conservation efforts.

The total output of the oceans peaked in 2000, and has been steadily declining ever since. Moreover, many commercial fisheries, such as Atlantic cod, whales or bluefin tuna, peaked long time ago. The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) estimates that 25 percent of all commercial fisheries are either overexploited or depleted, and half are operating at maximum capacity. Moreover, the last three decades have witnessed a steady trend towards more fisheries reaching maximum capacity and/or becoming overexploited (FAO 2004). A recent report warned that marine resources might be depleted as early as in 50 years (BBC 2006). Due to advances in fishing technology and government subsidies for fishing fleets, the world has an excess capacity of fishing boats and processing facilities as compared to the amount of fish it can sustainably harvest.

States responded to the chaotic *mare liberum* order by developing a number of treaties that regulated (however unsuccessfully) the extraction of specific species<sup>2</sup>. Examples date as far back as the beginnings of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when states tried to limit the exploitation of whales (Stoett 1997). The second response, and one with more far-reaching consequences,

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<sup>2</sup> For an exploration of the various treaties, see Peterson 1993 or Barkin and DeSombre 2000.

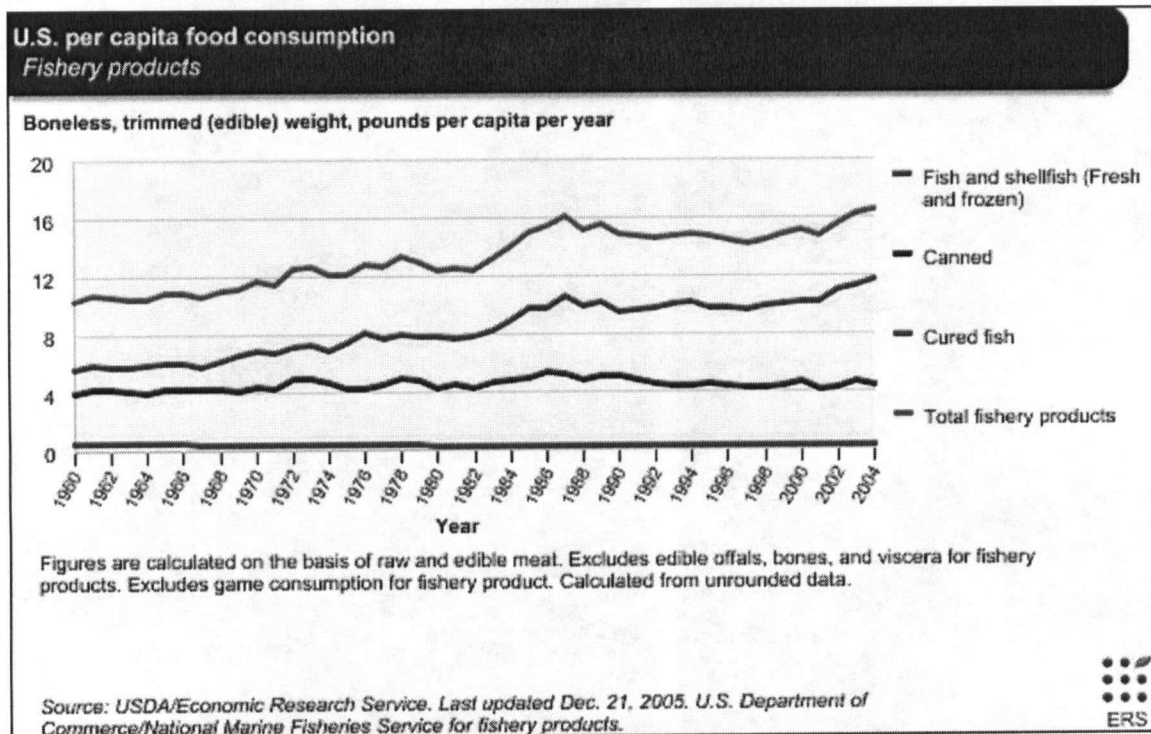
was the extension of coastal sovereignty to 200 miles beyond a country's shoreline. Between 1976-1977 most coastal states declared Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs). Because most fish resources are located within 200 miles of the coast, this effectively put an end to most common fishing grounds and brought them under the jurisdiction of states. It is estimated that the EEZs cover 35 percent of the ocean, but enclose up to 90 percent of all fishing resources (Vogler 2000:48). Only migratory species, like tunas and whales, are not fully enclosed within EEZs and continue to be governed by specie-specific treaties.

Given that output from the oceans has declined and prices have risen in turn, researchers in the 1990s expected a drop in seafood consumption (Hanson, Herrmann and Dunn 1995). In fact, quite the opposite has happened (See figure 1). Seafood consumption in the US and Europe has continued to climb (it doubled in the US in the last 30 years), and major distributors like Unilever or the sashimi-tuna market report having trouble finding enough fish to keep up with demand (Unilever 2003; Doulman 1987).

The increase in seafood consumption has risen hand-in-hand with reports that marine products are good for us. Omega-3 acids, the lean protein of fish, and the virtual absence of cholesterol in shellfish have pushed these products high in the eating agenda of consumers who otherwise might not consume as much seafood. The media has highlighted the beneficial aspects of the Mediterranean and Japanese diet (Moriyama 2005, Urology Times 1996, Takayama 2003, Franklin 1996, The Economist 1990), both of which have a strong seafood component. In response, or hand-in-hand with the rise of health discourses associated with marine products, American restaurant culture moved away from French cuisine, heavy on

cream, butter and red meats, and towards Japanese-inspired fare (Bestor 2000). Sashimi-grade tuna and other seafoods came out from sushi shops and ended up on the menus of all kinds of restaurants looking to offer healthier alternatives to their patrons.

Figure 1 – US per capita food consumption, fishery products



## Private Governance for the Oceans

In the last decade, North Americans and Europeans have been bombarded by a range of private initiatives seeking to prevent us from collectively eating the oceans away. Major NGOs, Aquariums, conservation agencies and even some private businesses have come to the conclusion that the state-order is unable to ensure the sustainability of the oceans. In

response, they developed a range of campaigns designed to protect specific species (stop the by-catch of dolphins in the tuna trade, stop whaling, save the belugas, protect salmon rivers), alter our seafood eating habits (Seafood eating guides), or introduce tougher private standards in the management of fisheries (the Marine Stewardship Council; Philipps and Chaffee 2003)

### *The Marine Stewardship Council*

By far the most prominent initiative concerned with marine resources is the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The MSC was born out of a partnership between the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, and was modeled after the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)<sup>3</sup>. The MSC is perhaps the most mainstream of the seafood eco-labels competing for our attention. The certification process mimics that of the FSC: Commercial fisheries apply to the MSC, go through a review of their practices, and are then incorporated (or not) to the project. If deemed sustainable, the fishery can market its products under the MSC logo (Constance and Bonanno 2000). To date, the MSC has certified 21 commercial operations (the Western Australian Rock Lobster was the first), and at least 17 other fisheries are in the pipeline awaiting certification.

Upon creating the MSC, Unilever committed itself to distribute only certified seafood by 2005—a goal they were unable to meet. Still,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the seafood they retailed in 2005 was certified and they defended themselves by pointing out that there is not enough certified seafood in the market yet to meet their needs (Unilever 2005). Endorsers of the MSC believe

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3 For more information on the Forest Stewardship Council, see Cashore, Auld and Newsom 2004

that the tough private standards they apply when conducting an assessment can catalyze a “race to the top” in the sound management of commercial fisheries. That is, if fishers around the world want to sell their fish to big purchasers like Unilever, they will have to comply with stricter standards than otherwise or risk alienation from the market. While Unilever does its business primarily in Europe under the “Igloo” brand, North Americans will soon be able to purchase certified MSC-seafood after Walmart committed itself to phase out non-certified wild seafood from its stores and replace them with MSC products (MSC 2006).

Critics of the MSC point out that its structure tends to favour large commercial fisheries in disregard of smaller operations (Constance and Bonanno 2000). The cost of certification, which can range between US\$20,000-US\$100,000, is born by the fishers themselves, and is all too often out of reach for artisan or small-scale operations. This is indeed ironic, since large-scale commercial operations are largely responsible for the collapse of fisheries, but their efforts at regulation could squeeze out smaller, and possibly more sustainable fishers. On a more skeptical note, it is also possible that Unilever and Walmart are trying to pre-empt criticism over their voracious appetite for seafood. To date, most activist work has focused on marine mammals, and not nearly as much attention has been devoted to the disastrous state of commercial fisheries. By regulating their own behaviour ahead of time, Unilever and Walmart could pre-empt any potential criticisms over their business practices, and even avert stricter state-regulation.

### *Consumer-based Initiatives*

While the MSC tackles the problem of ocean exploitation from a supply point of view, a number of programs exist to educate the public and affect seafood demand. The most prominent among these is the Seafood WATCH program, run by the Monterey Bay Aquarium. The Aquarium has been distributing for over six years little booklets that classify seafood species as being either red, yellow or green. If red, consumers should avoid eating them altogether because the specie is being mismanaged, eat them with caution if they are yellow, and eat their hearts out if they are green. The idea is that consumers will carry the guides with them and pull them out at restaurants and grocery stores to help them make sustainable choices. The Aquarium also advises restaurants on how to substitute questionable items for more sustainable choices, and provides them with a list of suppliers where they can find the new seafood. Finally, the Monterey Bay Aquarium hosts an annual "Cooking for Solutions" event that brings together chefs interested in sustainability and extends an award to recognize the work of committed chefs.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium is also a member of a number of partnerships with other Aquariums and NGOs, to which it supplies data on the status of fisheries. One of the partnerships is the Seafood Choices Alliance. Whereas the Seafood WATCH program focuses on classifying choices as red, yellow and green, the Seafood Choices Alliance focuses primarily on promoting sustainable choices. Their website is designed to help the public identify sustainable seafoods, and provides them with recipes and tips for selecting them in case they are not familiar with the items.

On the Canadian side, a group of NGOs including the David Suzuki foundation, the



Living Oceans Society and the Canadian Parks and Wilderness society among others, came together in 2006 to create a Canadian version of the consumer pocket guide of Seafood WATCH. Their program, SeaChoice, is essentially the same as Seafood WATCH—a booklet that classifies seafood as either red, yellow or green, and encourage people to eat green, exercise caution with yellow and avoid red. The green, yellow and red approach was also adapted by Fish Wise, based in Santa Cruz, California. The one distinction is that Fish Wise has focused more on the retail end of sustainable seafood, and has a large network of grocery stores that carry sustainable seafood offerings with their logo.

### **Ocean Wise**

Ocean Wise, the subject of this study, was created in January 2005 by the Vancouver Aquarium in partnership with Chef Robert Clark from “C” restaurant. Four months after the partnership was announced, Ocean Wise started recommending 16 restaurants that signed on to the initiative. The program has steadily grown in a short span and currently features 41 restaurants, a retailer and a cooking school. The program has proved highly popular with Vancouver restaurants. There is currently a waiting list of restaurants waiting to join, and the ability to expand is limited by the resources the Vancouver Aquarium can devote. Some of the major seafood houses in Vancouver have signed on, and the list of participants spans the range of chains like the “Cactus Club Cafe” or hotel restaurants associated with the Fairmont chain to small neighborhood single-standing restaurants like the “Tomato Fresh Food Cafe.” In terms of ownership arrangements, the sample of restaurants is mixed. In some cases, the chefs are on a salary. In others, they have a participation in the restaurant, whereas sometimes

they are full owners. When I asked the chefs how the ownership arrangements affected their decision to join Ocean Wise, those on contract reported that the decision was taken in conjunction or with the support of the owner.

Consumers will find the program's logo in the menu of the restaurants, highlighting which items are deemed sustainable by the Vancouver Aquarium. The Aquarium asks the restaurants to remove one questionable item every six months and replace it with something sustainable so that the menu slowly turns into a showcase of sustainable fare. "You don't have to be Ocean Wise overnight because they also realize that people need to run a business," said Karen Barnaby, executive chef of the Fish House at Stanley Park. Indeed, the program allows for a great deal of flexibility in how a restaurant chooses to honour its commitments to serve sustainable seafood. Chef X<sup>4</sup> noted:

They [Ocean Wise] made it pretty easy. In terms of joining the program, they didn't come to tell us to take everything off our menu all at once, we're not here to lecture you on what items are sustainable or not but to educate you and ask you to participate in the program and help educate the public and that's our responsibility.

The Ocean Wise approach is certainly in line with giving businesses flexibility in choosing how they honour their commitment to become more sustainable. Further to the flexibility it extends to the participating restaurants, Ocean Wise introduces at least two innovations to seafood eco-labeling. First, Ocean Wise works primarily with restaurants, not consumers. Mike McDermid from the Vancouver Aquarium explains:

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4 Chef X chose to remain anonymous

The major reason that we worked with restaurants is that restaurants are the most powerful group of seafood purchasers. In North America, about 68% of the value of seafood sold by suppliers is sold to restaurants and the food service industry. As well, working with restaurants is simply a more efficient use of resources. With the Monterey Bay Seafood Watch card, 3 million cards have been distributed over the past 5-6 years. Each of those cards has to change behaviour on an individual basis. This is a daunting task. However, when you change the purchasing behaviour of one chef or restaurant, you then affect all of their customers. On top of that, a restaurant is generally purchasing many more thousands of kg of fish yearly than any single customer. In summary, instead of changing the purchasing decisions of millions of individual consumers to change the seafood market, we can achieve the same effect by educating 1/10 the number of chefs with the Ocean Wise program.

Robert Clark from C Restaurant, the founding members of Ocean Wise further commented:

What you see now is that the sustainable seafood movement is going in two approaches. The Monterey Bay Aquarium, the first approach, was the card for the consumer to go into restaurants and ask where the seafood comes from. In Canada, with the Vancouver aquarium, we're approaching it from the opposite end. We're going from the restaurants to the consumers. Now that we're on both sides, I think we'll see a lot of progress.

Furthermore, if we can use the story of organic foods as a point of comparison for the role of fine dining in setting food trends in North America, the involvement of prestigious restaurants in promoting sustainable seafood could herald changes ahead. Alice Waters and her restaurant "Chez Panisse" in California was arguably responsible for setting the trend in serving local organic produce (Gutham 2003). Alice Waters believed, and still does, that the best tasting food is local and seasonal. Her menus were among the first to promote green organic salads, and she was one of the first to even include the name of the farms from where she got her ingredients. Following her lead, high-end restaurants found in organic greens an upscale diet food for which they could charge exorbitant prices. The market for organic

greens eventually moved beyond high-end dining and into mainstream grocery stores. Gutham traced back in her research the demand for organic greens to Chez Panisse and found that demand for them has done more to reduce pesticide use in California than any other initiative (Gutham 2003)

Second, Ocean Wise dropped the green, yellow and red approach, and simply distinguishes between sustainable and not sustainable. Tim Muehlbauer from O'Douls restaurant said: "I haven't discovered any problems with it yet [Ocean Wise] because it's so cut and dry. If it's sustainable, it's ok to use. If it's not, it's not." Christian Velden from the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts used the example of snapper to highlight the sustainable/unsustainable approach of the Vancouver Aquarium: "Snapper is a very low cost fish. That's why it's overfished, and that's why it's hard to find a snapper along the West Coast. Because there so many species of snapper, to find the right one and tell the sustainable from the unsustainable, nobody knows. That's why the aquarium comes and says we don't serve snapper at all. We can't label it as sustainable seafood because we don't know." Aron Bjornson commented on the merits of Ocean Wise in comparison to other certification programs:

They [Ocean Wise] have a bias towards what is sustainable and making sure the most amount of people have access to the right kinds of choices. There's a program in the United States called "Fish Wise" that signals fish as green, yellow and red, and they have a more evolved retail program with a lot more retailers involved. The challenge we saw with that is when it's in the yellow area. It's challenging; what does it mean as a consumer? We wanted just to highlight the products and the people behind the products that were going the extra mile for sustainability.

Karen Barnaby from the Fish House at Stanley Park put it from the perspective of a chef: “We just want to know what's good and what's bad. That's all we want to know—just make it really simple. The consumers probably need a little bit more blah blah than the chefs, because we already understand. Just tell us what we can use and what we can't use.” Ocean Wise's approach leaves little room for ambiguity. If there is a doubt about a particular specie, the program will not certify it as being sustainable. Chef X however felt that he was comfortable serving certain seafoods even if they would not receive the Ocean Wise logo: “[An] item like squid, there's just not enough studies to know whether they're sustainable or not. It doesn't get the logo but we're pretty comfortable with the levels of the stock.” Because restaurants have flexibility in how they replace their menu items to turn them into Ocean Wise-certified fare, chefs are allowed to disagree with some of the Aquarium's recommendations and still be part of the program.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter prepared the ground to contextualize the following section in which I present the empirics of my interviews with the chefs. I provided a brief account of the history of ocean governance and illustrated the trends in seafood consumption in North America. This section works to explain why the chefs felt that there is something wrong with the way the oceans are mismanaged and why they sought to join a private initiative to take further action. The chapter also provided an overview of the various approaches eco-labels have taken to protect the oceans, and I show that Ocean Wise introduced two innovations to

seafood eco-labeling—working with restaurants and dropping the green, yellow and red approach—that set it aside from the rest. Given that most seafood consumption in North America happens in restaurants, I use this thesis to gain a better understanding of what may motivate chefs to sign on to initiatives that protect marine resources. Having covered the essentials, the next chapter turns its attention to the main characters of Ocean Wise—the chefs.

## The Chefs of Ocean Wise

*Making the commitment to serve sustainable caught seafood is not always an easy one.*

Mike McDermid, Ocean Wise Coordinator

This chapter lays out the empirics of my argument. I use this space to provide glimpses of my discussions with the chefs, and highlight their collective rationale for joining the Ocean Wise program. The question that serves as the spinal chord for this section is deceptively simple: Why?—Why are these chefs voluntarily limiting the scope of their menus for the sake of ecological sustainability? I grouped their responses into three categories: I call the first category the “economistic” explanation; I show how the chefs rationalized their ecological efforts in business terms and how they made economic sense of their participation in Ocean Wise. This form of explanation was the least frequent in my interviews. The second category explores the personal rationale for why these chefs joined Ocean Wise. It illustrates the role personal beliefs and altruism played in motivating their decision to alter their menus to meet Ocean Wise guidelines. The final category, “moralizing seafood consumption,” discusses how the chefs are using their restaurants as sites where they can educate consumers into caring about the state of the oceans. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the challenges their restaurants face as they embrace a more sustainable menu. It shows that by and large these chefs have not perceived any noticeable economic returns for their ecological efforts. If anything, it is making their lives more difficult. I use this empirical discussion in the final chapter to assess our theoretical assumptions about eco-labeling, and argue that self-explanations reveal that altruism may play a role in motivating beyond-

compliance behaviour.

### **Practical Business Sense**

The explanations that fell under this category are the closest to the economistic view of eco-labeling in the literature. Some of the chefs expressed the view that by doing their bit, they could make sure that the oceans would not run out of product and they could continue running a seafood menu in the future. "Our first and foremost choice on the Ocean Wise program was what kind of impact we can have on sustainable fish. We sell a lot of fish company-wide and we want to make the right choices so we can continue to offer fish for a long time," said Dan Close from the Cactus Club Cafe. Robert Clark expressed a similar logic when he said that the "variety of what we have access to gets smaller as we make species commercially unavailable so as a restaurant we're interested in having as much variety as possible. We've always been trying to get other restaurants to be sustainable as well because if everybody is responsible, it's better for everybody."

The marketing coordinator of Capers Community Markets and the person behind the decision to join Ocean Wise, Aron Bjornson, was perhaps the closest anyone came to articulating their rationale in business terms. We were discussing the challenges of running a sustainable seafood case, because it might entail fewer choices for consumers, when he noted that "when you say you're scarce, you're having less options and it might place some costs on the business side. But, there's also the opposite side where the consumers are going and searching that and it creates more brand equity if you're actually giving consumers more



sustainable choices. They'll see that and correlate it to your business being much more progressive and sustainable.”

On the whole, few interviewees articulated their thoughts in these terms. Moreover, those who did quickly abandoned this line of thinking and expanded in greater length about their personal motivations. When I began my interviews, I anticipated long discussions on the role of the Ocean Wise brand helping their businesses, and the economic logic that I came to expect after surveying the literature. What I found was that nobody was interested in talking about it. No matter how hard I poked, the discussion invariably returned to morals and doing the right thing. Accordingly, I turn my attention to this.

### **The Discourse of Personal Responsibility**

If there was one common denominator in my interviews, it would definitely be that these chefs believed in doing the right thing. I term this the discourse of personal responsibility, because they saw themselves as agents for change. They believed that there is something wrong with the state of the oceans and it is their responsibility, as seafood purveyors, to do their bit in alleviating the oceans.

Some of the chefs had taken individual steps towards sustainability before joining Ocean Wise. In many cases, the first sustainability-inspired menu change was removing Chilean Seabass from their offerings; Chilean Seabass was a very popular fish in the 1990s in North American kitchens. “We started using Chilean Seabass and I remember it becoming

super popular. It's a great fish for a chef because you can overcook it and you'd prefer that because it's such an oily fish; it's got a great cooking cycle and it doesn't dry out or anything," explained Tim Muehlbauer. "But, over the years I noticed that the quality of the Seabass was declining—the fillets were super small, it wasn't as nice and then all of a sudden all this stuff started coming out that it was being overfished."

The life-cycle of the Patagonian Toothfish, or Chilean Seabass as it was later renamed, is not conducive to commercial exploitation. It only starts reproducing after 20 years, and at the rate they were fishing them out, they were poised to disappear fairly quickly. In light of the reports, several chefs started voluntarily removing them from their menus to do their bit to preserve the specie. "Four years ago when I was working in Calgary I took it off the menu. There's a lot of controversy on that one, and I said 'no, I'm not going to do it.' That was the first thing I did," said Christian Velden from the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts. Karen Barnaby traced back her interests on sustainability back to her Chilean Seabass experience: "First thing we did to move towards sustainability happened 7-8 years ago when we took [Chilean] Seabass off the menu and put sablefish instead. Then it was getting rid of all farmed salmon. It's been an incremental process of awareness." Chef X added that "we started becoming aware of the issues about Seabass before I worked here. I never after that sold Seabass again. Although it is popular, it is not ecologically friendly."

Some chefs were upfront about their personal philosophies and explained that serving non-sustainable items would simply be contrary to their principles. Robert Clark, the founding chef of Ocean Wise and the most visible spokesperson for the movement said that

"I have always been interested [in sustainable items]. I come from the East Coast of Canada and my upbringing is sustainability. My father is an organic farmer, but not because it is a movement but because he has always farmed like that. I come from a family of hunters and fishermen. It's never been about take it all, but take a little bit and make sure there's some there for next time. For me it's a cultural thing." David Hawksworth from West restaurant also aspired to a higher standard and said: "I've naturally always chosen safe seafood items." Velden, the dean of the Pacific Institute of Culinary Arts, tried to impress the need to respect the environment on his students. When I asked him about his curriculum and whether the students might want to learn to work with less-sustainable items because they will probably find them in their workplace, he said: "If you go somewhere else, they can teach you that. I'm not." Even in the case of Capers, whose representative articulated the most eloquent business rationale for joining Ocean Wise, he later conceded that joining the program has not resulted in any noticeable business results and that it's best to think of their involvement from a values point of view.

It's hard to say what impact it has had [Ocean Wise]. Has it been substantial enough for us to say, yes, as soon as we marketed these products as Ocean Wise, we noticed a 35 % increase in sales? No. There's no critical numbers that would make a strong case to help you write your paper...we don't have that kind of business thinking. For Capers we often have this piece where doing the right thing is just the right thing to do. Does that always mean that it's a positive business result? Not always, but it's the right thing to do and it has long term consequences. Another good example is that we moved to fair-trade organic cane sugar in our bakeries. Over 90 products feature organic fair-trade cane sugar, whereas we were using white sugar before. Did that increase our bakery sales? You can't say that it increased our bakery sales. But was it in line with our vision and values and our mandate to offer more sustainable choices? Of course it was, so it made sense for us. The same with Ocean Wise. As we researched and found out more about the Ocean Wise Program, we really thought it was important to take a lead in the market and with the goal that we would have more markets come into the Ocean Wise program.

The role of the government in regulating fisheries came up in a number of my conversations. The general feeling was that the government was either incompetent or did not care about sustainability. "There doesn't seem to be a lot of trust out there to the government, is there? Whether it's commercial fisheries, or private fisheries. *Do you trust the government?* You know what, I don't," said Muehlbauer. The representative of Capers did not think that the government could handle the workload of monitoring sustainability: "As far as I know, the department of fisheries is understaffed and is having a nightmare of a time keeping up with the regulations in place right now. Adding another level of sustainable regulations would be ludicrous." Given their apprehensions about the ability of the government to take positive steps in sustainable seafood, many chefs felt that they needed to take matters into their own hands and enforce standards by signing onto initiatives like Ocean Wise. Jason Antony from the DV8 lounge commented that "as a restaurant we were interested in sustainability in general...we have to go out-there and make decisions as individuals to try locate growers that are raising organic meat, who are growing organic crops, fishing in responsible ways because at least it appears that the government is not doing everything it can."

The final way in which the discourse on personal responsibility came up in the interviews was in reference to the volume of seafood these chefs work with. When I asked David Hawksworth how he became interested in sustainability, he replied:

That's what I work with. I work with seafood, I work with vegetables. That's what I

see everyday and that's something that is ingrained in your mind, because you work with such vast amounts of it...When you think about the volume that you do, you think differently about the whole process, the whole cycle...There's a lot of pressure for restaurants to be involved in that [sustainability], especially when it comes to something like Earl's or a big chain. They use vast quantities of food so there should be some pressure on them.

Dan Close added that "It's a very important process [sustainability], especially with the volume of seafood we do in our restaurant." Indeed, approximately 70 percent of all seafood consumption in North America happens in restaurants, and these chefs understand that their sector is in part liable for the decimation of commercial fisheries. At the same time, their sheer size empowers them to demand changes more effectively than a single-standing consumer as Velden explained: "These places [Cactus Club Cafe] can actually demand from the fishermen what they want. You can imagine if they say they won't buy farmed salmon anymore and they buy 200,000 pounds of salmon in a season, it's a big difference." Many of the chefs indicated that the fish suppliers of the city of Vancouver are aware that they are demanding sustainable products, and they have been forced to accommodate their requests to keep their business. "I guess there's a lot more restaurants in Vancouver that are doing this so the suppliers helped us as well because we had to submit [information] to Ocean Wise—where is it caught, how is it caught, lines, trolling, how does that catch affect the environment...It was a little bit of a headache to them, but at the same time everybody is coming on board and being environmentally respectful," said Muehlbauer. Bjornson added that "Albian, our biggest supplier, sees it in its best interest to make it easy for us to have sustainable choices so that when we're ordering products and need information, they can facilitate that."

## Rethinking Seafood Consumption

Often times, eco-labels ask consumers to pay a premium for a product that is more or less identical to the non-certified one. For example, there are practically no differences between dolphin-friendly tuna and a non-certified can. Similarly, an eco-label like Energy Star asks the consumer to pay a premium for an energy-efficient refrigerator but in the end it is still a refrigerator. Even when it comes to certified-organic, as more products become available, consumers can easily substitute their conventional choices for organic. The days of irregular produce at a hippie co-op are long gone—these days consumers can choose between conventional and organic ice-cream, breakfast cereal, jams and even TV-dinners. In this regard, sustainable seafood initiatives like Ocean Wise face a significant challenge because they have to change our eating habits. When I asked the Ocean Wise coordinator what he thought was the biggest challenge consumers face when making sustainable options, he replied:

Tradition. It may sound odd, but tradition often dictates our tastes and traditional choices may be the hardest to change. I don't mean tradition in the sense that these are tastes handed down from our ancestors, but more that they have specific cultural meanings or associations in society today. For example, lobster has always been associated with decadence, so if you want to impress someone you may serve lobster – farmed catfish just doesn't have the same ring.

When the restaurants sign on to Ocean Wise, they agree to progressively remove questionable items and replace them with more sustainable choices. The challenge, however, is that often times there is no direct equivalent between the species (salmon being the big exception—replace farmed for wild ), and their diners are not necessarily familiar with the

new choices. For example, Ocean Wise does not certify Chilean Seabass, but a common substitute, sablefish, is a less well-known specie and a harder sell. When they introduce new sustainable menu items, these chefs take a gamble that they can convince their patrons to try new things. "There's a lot of fish here that are not being used...It's the chefs that are driving the market so if we could get more people to ask for them," said Karen Barnaby.

Many of my interviewees thought that being part of Ocean Wise entailed educating the public. This meant that as they changed their menus to uphold the sustainability guidelines of the Vancouver Aquarium, they had to educate their customers about why they were changing menu items, and convince them to embrace new seafood. When I asked chef X about where he saw the program going in his restaurant, he said: "We're going to continue supporting the program and by supporting the program, we're going to slowly continue to pull more and more items off our menu and educate our regulars. Our regulars are the core of the business so the more we educate them about where we're going with the seafood, the more they will be ok with the decisions we take about what comes off." Educating consumers, however, can be a daunting task because eating habits tend to be sticky, as Velden notes:

In the mindset of the customer you get "here's what I've eaten all my life. I had my grouper, my Chilean Seabass years ago. Why can't I have it this time?" And if you're not explaining to them why they can't have it, they will not understand. If you tell them that it's not sustainably harvested seafood, the harvest methods, the black market, that it's not good for the environment, everything that's involved, then they say "ah," and they're more than happy to do that, and you give them an alternative. You tell them: "why don't you try something different, something new. I can guarantee you it will taste the same, even better, and you'll be surprised."

There certainly was hope in their efforts. Several of them expressed the view that a new wave of conscious consumerism is materializing, and that their businesses are at the forefront of enabling this higher consciousness "People's perceptions and attitudes about sustainability and the environment have changed drastically over the past few decades and will continue to change even quicker over the next few," said McDermid. Robert Clark started doing sustainable seafood when nobody else was doing it in Vancouver. Seven years ago he opened his restaurant and committed his menu to showcasing sustainable seafood. He said that the beginnings were challenging because sourcing sustainable seafood was difficult—no supplier wanted to accommodate his requests. In time he partnered with the Vancouver Aquarium, got more restaurants involved, and forced suppliers to pay attention to their demands. At the same time, he has been one of the most visible spokesperson for the movement, educating the public at a variety of venues on sustainable seafood. When I asked him about his thoughts on the progression of his restaurant, he replied:

When we started out, it was all baby steps. Work hard hard hard, and only get ahead a little bit. The fact that people are asking for sustainably harvested seafood and putting it into the mainstream and starting to list it, that's good. When customers start demanding it, it can only be a good thing. There'll still be the shady, gray conman out there trying to circumnavigate, but I believe there's a social conscious effort to move in the right direction.

Bjornson echoed similar feelings about the public education role that his institution plays in the sustainable seafood movement.

Capers found out that it is our responsibility to make sure that consumers have more information when they make their purchases...We really have to wake up to the fact that our choices, as an individual consumer—choosing to have prawns on a regular



basis—is going to have a big impact...My hope is that we raise a greater consciousness in consumers. A next generation of consumers is already happening.

Ultimately, these efforts are aimed at changing the frameworks with which we decide what to eat; they are challenging the mindset of the consumer when eating seafood. Furthermore, they felt that Vancouver was cutting-edge in raising the bar of sustainability in our food choices. “Vancouver is really groundbreaking in this whole thing,” said Velden. Several of the chefs I interviewed had worked or trained in Europe at some point in their careers. Others had worked in the United States. When I asked how Vancouver compared to these other places, the answer was invariably that Vancouver was at the forefront of the movement. They could not remember any similar initiative sweeping restaurants in Europe, and in the United States only California and the Bay area had a comparable movement. “In your country [I’m originally from Chile], or in Europe or Asia there’s a lot more culture, there’s a lot more respect for food. In North America that is just starting to be developed in places like Vancouver,” noted Muehlbauer.

### **The Challenges of a Sustainable Menu**

Did they [my customers] react to our menu being sustainable? Not so much.  
*(Jason Antony, DV8 Lounge)*

This section outlines what I found to be the most interesting aspect of the interviews. By and large, most of the chefs agreed that making the switch to sustainable menus did not result in increased sales, price premiums, or the brand equity we expect from eco-labels. Rather, they felt that the products they worked with were often more expensive, and limited

the range of choices they could offer to their customers. Muehlbauer summarized:

I've not yet had a customer conversation or a customer relationship that they come here because we're on Ocean Wise, or they come here because they know they're going to get wild salmon. It doesn't seem to be an advantage, put it that way. If anything, we can't sell things like Seabass, and that's the problem, people love Seabass, it's a great fish.

One of the challenges for the restaurants involved in Ocean Wise is changing menu items. As I already discussed in the previous section, several of the chefs take it as a personal mission to educate their clientèle and skew them towards more sustainable choices. Nevertheless, this is a risky proposition because patrons could simply change places to continue eating the seafoods they can no longer eat at Ocean Wise restaurants. The Ocean Wise schema allows the restaurants enough flexibility to decide which items come off and when, but as time goes on, and with the commitment to change something every six months, it will be inevitable that restaurants will have to pull popular but non-certified items. Velden commented on the challenges this presents:

These operations are really different from the school [large seafood houses like Joe Fortes]. They are the real thing because they write a menu and it stays for three months. For them to take an item off, it can be very tricky, because they have to rewrite their menus. For them to take an item off that's very profitable, then it becomes really tricky. A single-standing restaurant always operates on the brink of going under, so you have to be very careful with what you take off your menu.

Chef X expanded on the apprehensions he has about removing certain seafood items:

Some of the time we can't get diver-scallops so they're bred and we're not going to get the label. Our stance was that we were going to abide and probably exceed the

recommendation of taking one item off every six months that is not sustainable so we've kept on track. But, we've also kept some items on that are probably questionable. For instance, as a seafood restaurant it is very hard to take scallops off your menu. Probably one of the most destructive fishing practices is fishing for scallops, so we try to source scallops that are more friendly but I'm just not going to get the label...What we try to do is to minimize the impact and unfeature those items by putting them in less conspicuous places on the menu or use them in less dishes, but at the same time, the expectation is that they'll be able to come here and get scallops because it's a seafood restaurant, it's one of the core expectations. Black prawns would be another item. We want to slowly move away from it, but we've also featured the Texas prawns or the "divolde" prawns in the past and it hasn't been as well received. The texture isn't the same as the black prawns and we get a lot of comments when there's a qualitative difference between the items.

One of the questions I asked every chef I interviewed was what he or she thought are the biggest challenges restaurants face when trying to make sustainable choices. The answer was almost consistently a discussion of prices and sourcing. "I think in a perfect world, we would only carry Ocean Wise seafood. The real challenge will come in our customers fully accepting that program—we have to start with volume and pricing. Will it happen? Possibly. We can make that happen," said Dan Close. Velden concurred on the issue of price when I asked him what the biggest challenge for restaurateurs was:

The price. I think because some items can be more pricey...For example sablefish is a bit more expensive than Seabass per pound...If they use seasonal items, they are only available for certain amounts of time and you have to take something off and the customers can complain when they expect to see a grouper or a Chilean Seabass on the menu and you have to say "I don't have it, I don't serve it." You have to explain to the customer a lot why you don't do it and then some customers are really understanding but others really don't get it.

Karen Barnaby added a further element when she explained the challenges of pricing and special dishes:

For a lot of restaurants its either financial or ego-driven [the challenges]. Maybe the chef has a special dish with Seabass that's sold a lot and they don't want to kick it off the menu. And if we used some special ingredient like BC spot-prawns, we couldn't even sell it because it would be so expensive. If a customer comes in and sees fresh BC spot-prawns for 39.95...no way, no way.

Some of the chefs rationalized the extra money they paid for sustainable products in terms of quality. Robert Clark's restaurant, C, is a high-end operation with a tasting menu valued at CAD\$ 98 and \$145. When I asked him whether the products were more expensive, he replied that "there are exceptions but generally no. It's all about quality." Certainly, some of these restaurants have an affluent clientèle willing to support their sourcing practices. "One item we've really step up to the plate and pay more money for it is sablefish, or black cod. We're getting long-line black Cod from Gilco fisheries who specialize in sustainable fishery methods. We pay a couple of bucks more a pound but at the same time we find it's better quality so it's kind of a win-win situation: it's sustainable and a better product," said Chef X. Not all chefs however felt as positive about wild products, as Muehlbauer notes: "As a young chef, when they started farming salmon, sometimes it was quite pale or white, different sizes, etc. Over the years, every salmon is perfect. For a chef, if you're ordering farmed salmon, you always know what you're gonna get. It makes the portioning much easier, whereas wild products vary in sizes as well as damage and things like that."

Jason Antony added that for him price was not the only issue but also availability. When asked about the challenges, he answered that "cost is a big one, and availability. Unless you have someone in your operation who can spend time dealing with suppliers, it can be challenging to find the products. A lot of restaurants work on tight margins, so it's hard to

pass these costs onto the consumer.” When the Vancouver Aquarium partnered with Robert Clark to form Ocean Wise, one of the things Clark brought to the table was the experience of sourcing sustainable seafood for more than seven years. His answer to the challenge question was sourcing: “Our biggest obstacle at C for was sourcing because the companies weren't interested. Large companies are only interested in “we buy this” and we need somebody to sell it to. They're not “What do you want? We'll go look for it.” We're now 39 restaurants, and because the suppliers are now on board with sourcing sustainable seafood, it will be easier [for the new restaurants] to get it.” Still, for bigger operations, sourcing continues to be a challenge, as the executive chef from the Cactus Club Cafe explained: “For the restaurants [the challenge] is getting the sustainable product from our suppliers in an affordable manner and in the volume we need. That is my biggest challenge when purchasing fish. I'm not purchasing one or two salmons, but hundreds and hundreds of pounds of sustainable product. It can certainly be more expensive.”

Finally, one of the worries for the endorsers of sustainable seafood is that other restaurants will free-ride their efforts. Chef X explained:

We did a trip to Vegas this year to see where we stand, because you know Vegas is ground zero for restaurants these days, and I noticed Chilean Seabass everywhere. I guess because it's Sin City, people don't give a rat's ass about sustainability down there, and they're actually hitting a very friendly price point as well. I talked to the guys “What's going on down there? Why is there Seabass everywhere?” It seems that because everyone else has taken it off the market—cities like Chicago or LA—people tend to be more educated about their choices. A lot of restaurants are taking those items voluntarily off their menu and there's suddenly a lot of Seabass in the market and a place like Vegas comes in and buys it all up and they've got it in their menus and people go and see that it's a great fish to eat. But, at the same time, you have to wonder, without some kind of public education, it's creating an opportunity for people

with less scruples to capitalize on people downplaying certain menu items.

After my interview with chef X, I browsed the menus of some of the biggest restaurants in Las Vegas to confirm that they are indeed serving Chilean Seabass. I found that restaurants in some of the most prominent hotels (Bellagio, MGM, Venetian) have it in their menus, and many others had an identified Seabass among their offerings.

## **Conclusion**

This chapter presented the empirics of this study. I categorized the self-explanation of the Ocean Wise chefs into three themes—the economic explanation, the discourse of personal responsibility and moralizing seafood consumption. I showed that some of the chefs articulated a business explanation for why they joined Ocean Wise. Nonetheless, this framing was not prominent, and most of my discussions with them centered around the discourse of personal responsibility. They felt that in light of the plight of the global oceans, they had to step up and take responsibility over the role that their businesses play in the decimation of marine resources. Furthermore, they saw themselves as agents for change in the eating habits of their customers. They hoped that through their restaurants, they could educate the public and skew them towards more sustainable choices. I concluded the discussion with their thoughts on the challenges they face as businesses when committing to the stricter guidelines of Ocean Wise. What I found was that often times the chefs reported paying higher prices for their products, and that sourcing them could be a challenge. Further, the range of items they could work with was limited, and the Ocean Wise brand does not seem to be raking in any

extra business. The empirical section of this study leads me to the final chapter of this study, where I will use the data to comment on the state of the literature and offer some reflections on our theoretical assumptions about the economic approach to the study of eco-labeling and the role of altruism.

## Reconsidering Altruism

The previous chapter presented an empirical discussion of the rationale the chefs provided for why they joined Ocean Wise. An interpretative methodology reveals that they place a strong emphasis on the role of altruism to explain their involvement. In all of my interviews, I did not hear one chef say that s/he joined the program because of brand equity, or because they wanted to avert future risks in the form of government regulation, or because they wanted to profit from the price premiums an eco-label commands. Instead, I found a group of committed individuals who seek to challenge our current eating practices and re-educate the public on the workings of a healthy seafood market who are using Ocean Wise as a conduit for political activism. If anything, the program was a headache for them. They can no longer serve many items that are found in other restaurants in Vancouver and that are popular with the public, they pay more money for their products, they are harder to source, and they have to re-educate their customers. "*Why do they do it?*" I asked the coordinator of Ocean Wise at the Vancouver Aquarium trying to understand how he makes sense of the chef's involvement. "It's tricky because we're asking them to take money-making items off their menu. I think it's for purely environmental reasons. Why didn't they do it before? Lack of information. Now that we are here, they know what is sustainable and what is not," he said.

What was the purpose of investigating self-explanations? The majority of the studies done on eco-labeling and beyond-compliance agreements start with the assumption that there



is a logical, profit-oriented rationale behind the actions of the companies that sign on to them. The studies assume that there is an rational explanation, and the task of the researcher is to elucidate it. Their goal is to figure out how it is possible to make money, be competitive, turn a profit and be environmentally respectful, all at the same time. My approach differs in that I do not try to make sense of the business rationale. What I do is to try to understand them—I am trying to understand what the chefs understand themselves to be doing. Of course to a certain extent there is an economic calculation behind the efforts of the chefs, otherwise they would be bankrupt. However, this does not mean that they explain their actions to themselves in those terms. We are trying here to understand the *explananda* the chefs use to justify their actions, not the hidden rationales that they might not be even aware of. The chefs were not interested in talking about the economic logic of Ocean Wise. They were far more interested in discussing the role of beliefs, and the challenges they face when doing the right thing. They talked about the volume of seafood they handle and the responsibilities this implies. They talked about educating their clientele. They talked about the altruistic factors that motivate them to join Ocean Wise. These were the terms in which they framed their self-understanding of what it means to join an eco-label like Ocean Wise.

This study brings to light a set of dynamics that have been understudied in the literature on eco-labeling and private environmental governance. I show that for this particular sector, restaurants in Vancouver, we have to consider that people might believe in doing the right thing more than the theory would suggest. I seek to contribute to the debate by drawing attention to the role altruism can play in influencing a business's decision to join a private beyond-compliance initiative.

I introduced earlier Elizabeth Barham's call to move beyond the economic approach to the study of eco-labels, and to start looking at them for their political content as well. My research follows her lead and shows that individuals can partly endorse eco-labels for political reasons. The chefs explained their involvement with the Ocean Wise eco-label in terms of political content; rather than emphasizing the economic benefits an eco-label can provide, the chefs talked about it as a statement of commitment to the health of the oceans. The language they used to situate themselves in the eco-labeling movement was one of political action. This study contributes to Elizabeth Barham's argument, in that while eco-labels have undoubtedly market aspects to them, those who support them might explain their actions in the language of politics.

I am aware that my results cannot be generalized beyond this particular case; my selection bias and limited sample limits the scope of my results. For example, most restaurants are private businesses, and my sample of chefs spans between employees working in conjunction with an owner, part owners and full owners while the literature points out that privately held businesses have an easier time signing onto private environmental initiatives than publicly-traded companies (Andrews 1998; Bakan 2004). In examining only private businesses, I incur the danger of overstating the role beliefs can take in accounting for beyond-compliance behaviour. At the same time, institutions, be they publicly-traded companies or single-standing restaurants, are comprised of individuals. A company does not magically sign on to the Forestry Stewardship Council or distribute fair-trade coffee; it is individuals within them that push for these initiatives. These are people whose actions are

conditioned by morals, belief systems, and who may act with limited information and constraints on their ability to process all the implications of their actions. The ultimate goal of this study is to gain a better understanding of the individuals behind the decision of joining a private environmental initiative and show that at this level, altruism and the desire to do the right thing might play a larger role than the current theory would suggest. I hope my research elicits further interest in examining the role altruism plays in motivating other sectors to join private environmental initiatives.

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