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Food labelling

Sea change

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British fish is starting to go green

DOVER SOLE with a squeeze of lemon is a British favourite—so much so that numbers in some parts of the English Channel have fallen dramatically since peaking a quarter of a century ago. But now fish lovers can tuck in without guilt—as long as the fish comes from Hastings.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) this week certified two fisheries near the south-coast port—for herring and mackerel as well as Dover sole. The fisheries, it says, are managed so that their fish can be caught indefinitely without much harm to supporting species. The idea is to allow consumers to avoid fish grabbed from the sea without regard for what's left. Everything from fresh fish to pâté can be eco-labelled.

Rupert Howes, MSC's chief executive, knows his scheme cannot alone solve fishing's problem—which is that fishermen with bills to pay catch too many fish and politicians fail to stand up to them. But labelling does provide a mechanism for consumers to add their voices to calls for better fisheries management.

Although the MSC is based in London, its ambitions are global. White fish—a worldwide commodity for pies and breaded products—face strong competition for market share. When hokey was certified, South Africa certified its hake fishery, too, mindful of access to the US market. Now the Alaskan pollock fishery has done exactly the same.

In its five years, the MSC has certified 14 of the world's fisheries, six of them in Britain. MSC's labels are starting to appear in British supermarkets such as J. Sainsbury, Waitrose and Tesco. More international certifications are in the pipeline. But MSC has a long way to go, as its green fish are only 4% of the world's edible wild-capture fisheries.

Yet, it is a start. In the gloomy early days, there was no market for green fish because there was no supply, and no supply because there was no market. Unilever, whose frozen food contains lots of white fish, is to make eco-labelled fish around 30% of the total in Europe by volume, from less than 5% now. There will be nothing fishy about its origins.

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