WWF FINLAND’S FISH CAMPAIGN

English Summary of Key Results

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In 2012, WWF challenged Finland’s most important seafood traders to make concrete commitments to promote sustainability. The main goal of the campaign was that by the end of 2015, no fish listed as unsustainable in WWF’s Finland Seafood Guide would be sold in Finland. Another goal was to improve the protection of native endangered fish species and to enhance sustainability in fishing and aquaculture practices.

The campaign’s key goals are very close to being achieved, with a survey showing less than 2 percent of fish sold to be unsustainable, while close to two-thirds were listed as sustainable and just a third as intermediate. Data from Finnish customs show huge decreases in imports of fish on the unsustainable list – such as rays, eel and bluefin tuna. Correspondingly, the number of environmentally certified seafood products has increased considerably and products prepared from underused local fish species have also been introduced to a variety of shops and restaurants.

The campaign also helped gain improved fisheries management and protection for threatened fisheries, with salmon stocks in the Baltic Sea and sea trout in the Gulf of Finland showing signs of recovery. The environmental impact of Finnish fish farming has also been significantly reduced over the past few years making the Finnish rainbow trout and whitefish rare examples of fish farmed in open net pens that meet WWF’s criteria to be on the green list of WWF’s Seafood Guide.

The campaign’s success demonstrates the value of companies, fishing authorities, non-governmental organizations and citizens acting as one to help solve the overfishing crisis. However, a great deal of work remains to be done. The seafood sector must continue to develop sustainably, particularly with regard to farmed salmon and tuna. For these species, Finland must move to environmentally-certified alternatives. In addition, the consumption of abundant local species as food, such as Baltic herring, roach and bream, must be increased. A future challenge in the protection of native endangered fish stocks will be the recovery of the natural reproduction of migratory fish, such as salmon, trout, eel and anadromous whitefish, by removing migration obstacles from rivers and restoring spawning habitats.
Over the past 20 years, the global fish consumption has increased by one third, with population growth increasing fishing pressure further. According to WWF’s Living Blue Planet report (2015), populations of fish species utilized by humans have fallen by half over the past 40 years. With regard to the most important commercial fish stocks such as mackerels, tunas and bonitos, the situation is even more alarming: they are estimated to have reduced by more than 70 percent. Over the course of the 2000s, the dwindling fish stocks have become one of the most serious global environmental problems.

Finns increasingly consume seafood. This increase in consumption is due to imported seafood becoming more popular. Converted to fillet weight, an average Finn consumes around 15 kilos of fish and other seafood per year, which accounts for more than 70 percent of imported seafood. The consumption of fish from Finnish fisheries amounts to four kilos per capita annually, and the consumption of many abundant species, such as Baltic herring, has declined significantly in Finland. The ripple effect of our seafood consumption influences not only our national waters but also the world’s oceans.

Commercial fisheries in Finland comprises mostly small-scale coastal and freshwater fisheries as well as trawling for small pelagic fish species, such as Baltic herring and sprat. Generally, commercial fisheries in Finland poses no major threat to the marine environment. However, a special problem is caused by intensive fishing pressure on some endangered species such as salmon, anadromous whitefish, sea trout and eel.

In Finland, the main factors behind the decline of fish stocks is the construction of hydropower, along with other changes to the natural environment, which have destroyed the majority of migratory fish stocks. Following the destruction of habitats, fish stocks have principally been managed by stocking fish, a practice which, in many cases, has led to increased or almost unrestricted fishing. Furthermore, fisheries management based on stocking has drawn attention from the remediation of habitats and the need for the protection of endangered fish species.
WWF’s Fish Campaign was born in 2012 with the idea to raise awareness of seafood sustainability issues, the increasingly endangered status of fish species and methods for sustainable fishing. The campaign raised these issues to become part of the Finnish national political and social agenda. The idea of a more extensive campaign gained support from the reform of EU’s Common Fisheries Policy and the comprehensive reform of the Finnish Fishing Act, both of which were perceived to be significant avenues in changing the direction in which fisheries policy, not only in Finland but more broadly in the Baltic and European waters, was headed.

In accordance with WWF’s practices, the campaign sought to have various parties and actors committed. WWF’s Seafood Guide was the cornerstone of the campaign. As a key element of the campaign, WWF challenged all of Finland’s most important fish operators to make concrete commitments to promoting sustainability in seafood consumption, the protection of endangered fish species and the sustainability of fishing and aquaculture practices. Above all, the campaign sought to remove all the red listed species in WWF’s Seafood Guide from the Finnish market. With regard to endangered fish stocks, the minimum target was set at placing the critically endangered species, such as sea trout, eel, sea spawning grayling, Saimaa arctic char and landlocked salmon, under protection. At the same time, the campaign sought to increase the consumption of abundant local fish species and to boost the volume and availability of certified seafood products on the Finnish market.

Under the Fish Campaign, a letter challenging various actors to participate was sent to approximately 100 key fish operators. A total of 50 enterprises and operators responded to the challenge, half of which represented the seafood trade, the catering sector and seafood processing companies. A variety of civic organisations, tourist businesses and other operators in the fisheries sector also registered to the campaign, all of them wishing to contribute to the campaign.

In addition to the challenge, WWF sought to raise consumers’ awareness of sustainable seafood consumption and endangered fish species and to have individuals to commit to the recommendations of WWF’s Seafood Guide in their personal shopping selections. At the same time, the campaign attempted to engender extensive social debate with the intention to help enterprises commit themselves to increased responsibility to source sustainable seafood products and promote the goal to move key political processes forward to attain the campaign’s targets.

The progress of the Fish Campaign and the commitments of enterprises were monitored by conducting active questionnaire studies that surveyed the changes that had taken place in seafood assortments, the recognition of WWF’s Seafood Guide and the attitudes of enterprises and individuals.
WWF Seafood Guide gives consumers and traders recommendations on sustainable seafood choices. The guide enables a consumer to make environmentally responsible seafood choices when shopping at a retailer or ordering at a restaurant, so that they become a key lever of change in the seafood supply chain. Through the WWF Seafood Guide, WWF is pushing changes to more sustainable fisheries management by influencing authorities and the market directly by consumers through deliberate choices in the purchase of seafood.

WWF Seafood Guide provides sustainability information depicted using a ‘traffic light’ system of green (best choice), yellow (think twice) and red (avoid) lists. The recommendations are based on a methodology that WWF, together with the North Sea Foundation and the Marine Conservation Society, has developed to evaluate fisheries and aquaculture worldwide. The assessment methodology scores points for the corresponding fishery or aquaculture which is then expressed in a traffic-light approach.

WWF Finland’s first Seafood Guide was published in 2006. At that time, consumers and retailers had few resources to understand and identify potential seafood sustainability concerns or guide procurement. WWF Finland has been engaging with the seafood industry for over ten years and has now reached a threshold at which the Seafood Guide is perceived to have gained significant impact on Finnish consumers, fisheries managers and major players in the seafood industry.

**MSC and ASC ecolabels**

WWF recognises the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) as the most credible on-package assurances of sustainable fisheries and responsible aquaculture practices. WWF recommends to look for these ecolabels on products as an assurance for traceable and sustainable seafood and places all MSC and ASC certified products on the green list of the Seafood Guide.

To find out more please visit [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org) and [www.asc-aqua.org](http://www.asc-aqua.org).
In order to assess the results of the Fish Campaign, WWF sent an enquiry in late 2015 to the enterprises that had participated in the campaign in an attempt to measure the environmental responsibility of the seafood assortment of Finnish enterprises. The enquiry asked the enterprises to list the seafood products in their assortment in accordance with the recommendations of WWF’s Seafood Guide and to place them in the green, yellow and red categories according to the number of products. The enquiry also asked the enterprises to supply information on the developments in the number of MSC (Marine Stewardship Council) certified products, to estimate to what extent the enterprises were able to deliver on their promises made to the campaign challenge.

A total of 20 enterprises, covering in practice the entire food retail sector in Finland, replied to the WWF’s survey. Furthermore, WWF received responses from the representatives of institutional kitchens, wholesalers and seafood producers. Therefore, the results of the enquiry can be regarded as providing a fairly comprehensive representation of the Finnish seafood trade.
Removing red-listed seafood from the market

Of the assortment of the enterprises that had answered the enquiry, an average of 62 percent of the products were on the Seafood Guide’s green list and 35 percent on the yellow list. The number of products on the red list was on average only 2 percent of all seafood products. On the basis of WWF’s Seafood Guide, the average amount of products that the campaign was unable to assess the sustainability of amounted to only one percent of all products. (Picture 1)

Little difference was observed between the various sectors with regard to the distribution of seafood products falling in the green, yellow and red categories (Picture 2). In terms of percentages, restaurants and enterprises in the catering business reported the most green listed species (69 percent on average), while the proportion of red listed species was highest in the assortments of production industry (3 percent on average). In sum, only six enterprises among those that responded to the enquiry had red list species in their assortments – according to the information supplied by the enterprises, tuna, tropical shrimp, Baltic salmon, tilapia, eels, Atlantic wolffish and Norway lobsters. Except for tuna, the above-mentioned red list species are mostly small-volume products.

The results of the enquiry were based on information reported by the enterprises themselves, thus the reliability could not be ascertained. Furthermore, the validity of the results is limited by the fact that the largest operator in the daily consumer goods trade, SOK, was unable to provide detailed information on the sustainability of its seafood assortment. However, based on the information received, it can be said that the current volume of the red listed species in WWF’s Seafood Guide on the Finnish market is remarkably

![Picture 2. Sustainability of Seafood Products Broken Down by Sector.](image-url)
small. The goal to remove all red listed species according to the guide from the Finnish market has been achieved almost completely.

**More certified seafood products**

The enquiry indicates that enterprises have substantially increased the proportion of MSC certified seafood products. On the whole, the number and volume of MSC certified products in Finland has grown steadily. The first MSC certified products went on sale in Finland in 2007. By 2011, the number of MSC certified products had increased to more than 100 products, and at the end of 2015, more than 400 such products were available on the Finnish market (Picture 3).

The first ASC certified (Aquaculture Stewardship Council) aquaculture products were released onto the Finnish market in 2012, and today, the number of such products on the Finnish market amounts to around 90. The ASC certified products on the Finnish market comprise mainly of the following species: pangasius, tilapia and tropical shrimp. Environmental problems associated with aquaculture are closely related to Finns’ fish consumption as farmed salmonids, especially farmed salmon, have been for years the most popular seafood in Finland. In the future, the challenge will be how to increase the proportion of ASC certified options in the consumption of farmed salmon.

**The declining trend in the consumption of local fish has reversed**

The enquiries conducted (2013 and 2015) indicate that many operators have increased the proportion of local underused fish species in their assortments. For example, new products have been developed from roach and bream to meet the needs of institutional kitchens. Despite this, the consumption of local fish continues to remain small compared to imported seafood, especially farmed salmon. However, a positive aspect of this is that the long-standing
increase in the popularity of imported seafood and, conversely, the decrease in the consumption of local fish seem to have reversed over the past few years. (Picture 4)

**Development of the sustainability of the seafood market**

No precise information exists on the sustainability of Finnish seafood trade before the Fish Campaign was launched. However, on the basis of the statistics of the Finnish Customs, enquiries and other available information, it can be deduced that the number and volume of red listed seafood species according to WWF’s Seafood Guide have significantly decreased since the Fish Campaign was launched.

For example, according to the statistics of the Finnish Customs, 30,000kg of eel was imported to Finland between 2004 and 2011 on average, but, in 2015, only around 200kg. Between 2004 and 2011, approximately 30,000kg of swordfish and nearly 850,000kg of Nile perch was imported to Finland on average. Even their import has significantly decreased: in 2015, only 2,500kg of swordfish and around 560kg of Nile perch was imported to Finland. No ray and bluefin tuna was imported to Finland in 2015.

The large proportion of seafood listed green according to the WWF Seafood Guide was probably due to the significant increase in the volume of certified fish products and the fact that most important Finnish aquaculture species, rainbow trout, was placed on the green list of WWF’s Seafood Guide. Similarly, the classification of the most important catch species in Finnish coastal fishery, anadromous whitefish, was moved from the red to the yellow list following improvements in fisheries management. The large proportion of yellow listed

![Picture 4. Seafood Consumption 1999-2015.](source: Natural Resources Institute Finland, Fish consumption)
species is probably, and especially, attributable to the large proportion of farmed salmon and tuna in Finns’ fish consumption.

On the basis of WWF’s Seafood Guide, the proportion of products that the campaign was unable to assess the sustainability of amounted to only to one percent of all products on average as displayed in Picture 1. Above all, this is an indication of the fact that the enterprises that responded to the enquiry are well aware of the origin and sustainability of the fish that they purchase. Therefore, it can be assumed that the Fish Campaign has played a role in motivating enterprises to clarify the origin of their seafood and has encouraged them to improve the traceability of seafood products.

**Impact of WWF’s Seafood Guide**

Except for one, all the enterprises that responded to the enquiry reported that they used WWF’s Seafood Guide in decision-making regarding their choice of seafood. The Seafood Guide is also generally known by the citizens. According to a survey conducted by Raisio in 2015, 33 percent of Finns say that the recommendations of WWF’s Seafood Guide influence them. The website of the Guide has had more than 150,000 visitors since the campaign was launched, and, year after year, the Seafood Guide continues to be one of WWF Finland’s most popular publications.

Over the years, WWF’s Seafood Guide has received considerable media coverage. In sum, the number of published articles, interviews and writings regarding WWF’s Seafood Guide and fish-related work amounts to more than one thousand since the campaign was launched, according to a conservative estimate. Therefore, media has had a significant role in raising and spreading the knowledge of the WWF Seafood Guide and understanding of its recommendations.

The comments made by several enterprises that responded to the enquiry also highlighted the role played by WWF’s Seafood Guide and the consumers. Previous surveys conducted by WWF on the development of the sustainability in seafood trade also indicated that consumer demand and WWF’s Seafood Guide were regarded as significant factors directing the seafood purchasing policies.

**Sustainability has become part of everyday life in Finnish seafood trade**

From WWF’s perspective, the most important and essential development in Finnish seafood trade is the fact that enterprises and consumers have become aware of the seafood sustainability issues and have adopted clear criteria regarding the sustainability of the seafood products that they purchase. On the basis of responses received from enterprises, the responsible purchasing of seafood products has become commonplace in Finnish seafood trade, with the sustainability perspective spreading through the entire production chain. While the challenges of fishing and aquaculture practises related to certain species, such as tuna and farmed salmon, are difficult to control from the Finnish market, Finnish seafood trade, catering business and consumers may show leadership and put pressure on operators, encouraging them to rectify the problems related to fisheries and aquaculture in other parts of the global seafood trade market.
Major progress has been made in the protection of endangered fish stocks over the past few years. In order to promote the restoration of endangered fish stocks, several strategies and action plans have been drawn up in Finland, such as the national fish passage strategy, the regulation and management programme for whitefish fisheries, and the salmon and sea trout strategy. The most central and important reform has been the comprehensive reform of fishing legislation.

This comprehensive reform of fishing legislation was much needed, as the previous Fishing Act, which came into effect in 1982, was insufficient to ensure the conservation of endangered fish species and stocks in Finnish nature. Until 2014, not a single fish species or population had been protected against fishing legislation in Finland. With the adoption of the new Fishing Act and Decree, almost all endangered fish species are either protected against fishing or their fishing is subject to regulation in accordance with a valid management plan.

**Fisheries management is changing – fish stocks are recovering**

The measures taken over the past few years by the Ministry for Agriculture and Forestry regarding the management of salmon, the protection of endangered fish species and the resolving of conflicts between environmental organisations and the fishing industry have significantly promoted collaboration between the Ministry, environmental organisations and the fishing sector. The collaboration groups and consulting committees of the fishery administration have opened up to include environmental organisations, and the Ministry has implemented several participatory processes which have been successful in creating an atmosphere of trust. Today, it can be stated that environmental organisations and Finland’s fishery administration have taken significant steps to reduce conflict and move towards a more genuine partnership of all involved stakeholders.

In terms of catch quotas, Finland is currently the largest fishing state in the Baltic area. Managing abundant stocks of Baltic herring have also made Finland one of the most responsible fishing nations in European waters. According to a comparison conducted by the British New Economics Foundation (NEF), Finland was the most responsible EU Member State in Northern Europe regarding the catch quota decisions between 2001 and 2015 (NEF 2015). The 2016 Environmental Performance Index (EPI), using metrics focusing on fish stocks, also placed Finland among the ten best countries globally (Hsu et al., 2016). Of the EU Member States, only Malta’s performance was better than that of Finland’s.
Another testimony to the responsibility of the fisheries management is the fact that the catch of Finnish commercial fisheries almost exclusively comprises fish species on the green list of WWF’s Seafood Guide – that is, recommended ‘Best choice’. Of the fish species important to commercial fishing, only whitefish is on the yellow list, indicating that consumers should exercise prudence when purchasing it.

**Salmon and sea trout stocks are on the increase**

The concrete effects of political decisions on the state of fish stocks often become visible only after several years. However, regulation implemented over the past few years is already bearing fruit. The regulation of salmon fisheries in the Baltic Sea has resulted in the record-high number of ascending spawners, especially in the rivers flowing into the Bay of Bothnia. The spawning stocks of Finland’s wild salmon populations have increased fivefold over the past five years, with the River Tornionjoki being currently the largest spawning river of Atlantic salmon in the world (Picture 5; the Natural Resources Institute Finland 2016).

**Picture 5. More Stringent Regulation of Salmon Fishing in the Baltic Sea Has Increased the Number of Salmon Returning to the River Tornionjoki and Simojoki.**

![Graph showing the increase in salmon spawners from 2010 to 2016 for Tornionjoki and Simojoki rivers.](source: ICES and Natural Resources Institute Finland)
In addition to salmon stocks, the regulation of fishing and the restoration of habitats have contributed positively to the recovery of critically endangered trout stocks (Pakarinen & Saura 2016). Juvenile densities have grown for a long time in many coastal rivers flowing into the Gulf of Finland, and, over the past few years, observations have been made indicating that the number of large spawners has increased.

**The sustainability of aquaculture is developing**

In Finland, aquaculture is subject to stringent environmental legislation and licensing. In just over ten years, the overall nutrient load of Finnish fish farming has halved, and the released load per production unit has reduced by almost one third. However, aquaculture in Finnish waters continues to have negative local effects regarding, for example, the quality of water and seabed.

In 2014, WWF’s Seafood Guide gave a green light to rainbow trout farmed in Finland for the first time, with whitefish farmed in Finland making the Seafood Guide’s green list in 2016. Rainbow trout and whitefish contribute together to around 99 percent of Finnish aquaculture production. On a global scale, Finnish rainbow trout and whitefish are rare examples of fish farmed in open net pens that meet WWF’s criteria and be on the green list.

In the future, measures will be taken to direct aquaculture away from sensitive areas using a special spatial management plan. Efforts have been also taken to reduce the negative effects of fish farming, by replacing net pens with recirculation systems. Furthermore, the first fishmeal factory in Finland began operation in 2016, making better use of Baltic herring as feed for fish farming.
Conclusions and Follow-up Action

The achievements of the past few years are a result of collaboration

On the whole, the targets of the Fish Campaign have been successfully achieved. Sustainability requirements have become an everyday element in the seafood trade in Finland, and companies are very familiar with the origin and ethical status of the seafood they purchase. The protection of endangered species has progressed by leaps and bounds, with the new fishing legislation and the strategies drawn up over the past few years aiming at bringing fish stocks to their original levels, and at protecting weakened and endangered fish populations. The environmental impact of Finnish fish farming has also been significantly reduced over the past few years.

The main reason for this good result is above all, the fact that the many actors involved have prioritised to resolve the problems related to fishing and fish stocks. Active participation of citizens has played a particularly significant role. The contributions of public figures, media and the networks of social media have been highly important in making the public aware of the problems related to both global and local fish stocks. Focusing to shape public opinion while simultaneously engaging on many fronts and levels, including the seafood trade, citizens and political decision makers, has enabled the campaign to achieve its set targets. Enterprises in the industry have done a great deal of work, directing resources to developing sustainability, with many of them assuming an uncompromising attitude, thereby taking an economic risk. Enterprises have also been engaged in successful development work. For example, launching roach and bream products onto the market was not without problems; rather, it required a great deal of persistent work and the renewal of traditional procurement channels. Enterprises in the business have also played an important role in resolving the challenges associated with fish farming.

Recreational angler organisations, civic organisations and, particularly, the fishery administration, deserve a special thank-you for developing the protection of endangered fish stocks. The road to the current situation has been a bumpy one, and an efficient enforcement of the new fishing legislation and the EU’s Common Fisheries Policy will require a great deal of work. However, Finland’s fishery administration, both on a regional and national level, has demonstrated in an exemplary fashion how problems and conflicts can be solved and old operational methods changed. Finland’s fishery administration has also measured up in international corporations, and today it can be said that Finland is one of the leading nations with regard to the sustainable management of commercial fish stocks.
**Future challenges**

There are still challenges in spite of the campaign’s excellent achievements. With regard to the seafood trade, the challenge continues to lie particularly in developing the sustainability of farmed salmon and tuna, and in increasing the consumption of underused local species. On the whole, the consumption of local fish continues to remain small compared to imported fish, especially farmed salmon. However, a positive aspect of this is that the long standing increase in the popularity of imported seafood and, conversely, the decrease in the consumption of local fish seem to have reversed. Efforts must be made in the future to increase the consumption of abundant local species, in particular Baltic herring, roach and bream. It is also important that farmed fish and tuna are replaced by sustainable alternatives that have been granted an environmental certificate.

Following the adoption of new fishing legislation, many of our endangered wild stocks were protected against fishing. However, ultimately the problems that our endangered fish populations are faced with are the outcome of habitat destruction and the blocking of migratory routes. In the future, the restoration of endangered fish stocks will require increased efforts to remove or bypass migration obstacles, and to restore habitats.

In addition to endangered fish stocks, the future of the commercially-important pike-perch and cod populations is a cause for concern. In places, pikeperch is subjected to overfishing, and especially in the Finnish Archipelago Sea, an observation has been made indicating that intensive fishing with close-meshed nets has already led to changes that may reduce the productivity of the region’s commercially-important pikeperch population, perhaps irrevocably. Cod populations in the Baltic Sea are also subject to overfishing, and the International Council for the Exploration of the Sea (ICES) has recommended that cod quotas be substantially reduced in order to allow the populations to recover. So far, measures to restore cod stocks have been insufficient.

Finland has come a long way since the Fish Campaign was launched. However, a great deal of work remains to be done in order to create a brighter future for fish.
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We promote constructive interactions to create awareness, spread ideas and stimulate discussion among stakeholders and partners.

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We are a diligent watchdog that monitors how governments manage our common resource, the Baltic Sea.

REGIONAL NETWORK

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