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Where does fish come from?

Check Against Delivery
Seul le texte prononcé fait foi
Es gilt das gesprochene Wort

SlowFish Opening Conference

Genoa, 27 May 2011

Minister Romano, Mr. Burlando, Mr. Petrini, authorities, ladies and gentlemen,

It is a real honor to address an audience of informed citizens who care about what we eat and how it gets to our table. And I know that when it comes to fish, many of you are not just *informed* citizens, but rather *concerned* citizens.

We hear that fish resources are depleted. That fish contains dangerous pollutants. That it is sometimes sold under false labels. We hear that big amounts of fish are thrown overboard because they were caught by mistake.

So what should we do?

Well, we can probably change the way we eat; but we definitely have to change the way we fish.

As Commissioner for Maritime Affairs and Fisheries, I am mainly responsible for that: the way we fish. But today I will attempt to give you a few ideas on both the way we eat and the way we fish, as they are more closely connected than one would think.

Because fish is a shared resource, the EU has exclusive competence for its conservation. Over the years the Common Fisheries Policy has become complex, with too much detail decided at central level, which makes it harder to implement and to control; more importantly, too much focus is put on short-term economic interests, which too often seem to prevail over environmental considerations. Instead, we must turn this around and hinge our actions on sustainability – and sustainability only.

This combined effort - towards decentralisation and towards sustainability - is at the heart of the proposals that I am soon going to put forward to change the way we fish.

With the reform of the Common Fisheries Policy, I hope to introduce a new approach to fisheries management, based on a way of fishing that does not prevent fish from reproducing and growing. A new way of fishing that respects sensitive areas like spawning grounds or sensitive habitats and that spares non-target species such as seabirds, cetaceans and sharks. A new way of fishing which avoids unwanted catches in the first place and phases out the practice of discarding them overboard.

In other words I am pushing for an ecosystem approach to fisheries management.

At the same time, I also believe that the new system should adapt to each region's heritage, tradition and know-how; the fishing industry itself, with its irreplaceable expertise and knowledge of the seas, should play its part in the conservation of resources and come up with the best solutions to achieve sustainable and efficient resource use.

I want this reform to mark a real step forward towards sound marine management, which is the basis for a sustainable future for our fishermen, particularly small-scale fishermen, and our coastal communities.

However, ladies and gentlemen,

No matter how well we progress towards these objectives, there is one thing that can undermine all our conservation efforts: illegal fishing. By harvesting stocks unsustainably, illegal fishing can destroy habitats and disrupt ecosystems. And it is not just a crime against the environment: it also distorts markets with unfair competition, damages law-abiding fishermen and erodes consumer confidence.

Last year, the EU introduced important legislation that makes control much more effective, punishes wrongdoers and makes fish traceable through every step of the market chain - from the net to the plate.

We make use of electronic technologies for data collection and checking; we have inspectors all over Europe; and we even introduced a point system, similar to the one you have in Italy for driving licences [*"la patente a punti"*]: people who are repeatedly caught fishing illegally, end up losing their fishing licence.

So we have declared zero tolerance against illegal fishing. But we aren't stopping there: we are already onto the next steps, and these involve new traceability tools based on genetics, genomics and forensic techniques....

Yes, it sounds like science fiction, but we do have the technology: we can determine exactly where each fish comes from, as you will hear in the press conference later this morning. Just like it's done in crime detection, we might decide to use modern molecular technology to spot fraud in our sector.

Mr Petrini, please rest assured that we will go the extra mile to ensure that eco-labels may not be falsified or circumvented; that once the product reaches the stores, the consumer can be confident it has been fished sustainably.

Ladies and gentlemen,

As informed citizens, you know that fish is universally acclaimed as a healthy component of our diet. We all know it is rich in protein, but it's not just that: its prime value lies in the fact that it contains clusters of brain-specific nutrients, the omega-3 fats, which our body cannot produce, and must get from the diet.

These fats, DHA and EPA, affect mental health throughout our life cycle. Scientists have connected poor mental development of babies with insufficient supplies of DHA during pregnancy. Later, DHA and EPA influence educational performance, aggressive behavior, depression, senility and Alzheimer's disease.

Fish also helps regulate blood pressure, thus reducing the risks of heart attack, and blood sugar, which is good for weight loss and diabetes. It is a source of vitamins and minerals, it helps combat osteoporosis.... Should I go on?

I think I made my point, but let me add this: fish is also quick and easy to cook. For me it's the only healthy and acceptable form of "fast food"!

So, don't stop eating fish; we should keep consuming it, and consuming lots of it. As long as it comes from sustainable sources!

As to where all the necessary fish should come from, we know that stocks can produce more if fished at sustainable levels: so if we make the effort for some time, we can expect that, in the medium term, the fish populations will rebound.

And some of our efforts are paying off already: today, 37% of the stocks we have studied are being fished at sustainable levels. Only last year this figure was 28%. According to scientists, there are 11 stocks that we should stop fishing altogether. Last year there were 14.

Naturally, we also need to look for ways to sustainably develop fish farming, both on land and marine. Aquaculture is part of the supply solution - and an important source of growth, jobs and stability for the sector.

To conclude, ladies and gentlemen,

I carry a dual responsibility here. On the one hand I have to ensure that Europeans get as much seafood as they need; and on the other I have to make sure that natural resources are not over-exploited: that they are used sustainably and with respect for the marine natural balance.

I know that public opinion is in on the reform of the common policy. A recent poll shows that people want the fish in the shops to come from non-overfished sources, and hundreds of thousands have signed a petition against discards in the UK alone.

But I equally expect some opposition to my proposals - both from parts of the fishing industry and from the political levels - and that's why I need your support.

As informed citizens who care about production methods and cycles; as fish consumers; or as members of an industry which is too often struggling against external forces such as the economic crisis, rising fuel prices or climate change impacts: I ask you to support the reform.

There is a lot you can do: convince your MEPs and national Ministers to choose foresight. Make them see that the environment cannot always heal itself and that in this business, what we do to nature, we do to ourselves. Pressure them not to give in to short-term economic interests but to go for the common good.

If you are here today, it's because you care. You don't want to leave our children a degraded planet with diminished resources. You feel you are part of a single society with a shared responsibility and a moral obligation to make things right.

Italian Nobel Prize Rita Levi Montalcini said that civil society ("*una società civile globale*") can create opportunities to reduce our environmental impact. The key lies in this awareness.

I'm here to tell you that I care too. Let's make this reform an important step towards healthy, sustainable and ... slow fish for all.

Thank you.