

Creating an industry standard for sustainable, resilient and high wellbeing small-scale fishing

A quiet revolution is taking place in the fishing industry. Caroline Bennett, founder of Sole of Discretion (SoD), is leading the charge to transform how we think about sustainable seafood and support small-scale fishers in the UK. By developing a new UK seafood industry standard for small-scale, low impact fishing, Caroline is bridging the gap between conscientious consumers and low-impact fishing practices that benefit the wellbeing and resilience of UK inshore fishermen and their communities. As an example of a project working at the nexus of resilience, wellbeing and environmental sustainability, the SMMR ROCC project provided pilot funding to Caroline for a promotional video to raise awareness of the initiative.

Angela Phan of ROCC caught up with Caroline to discuss her work with small-scale fisheries, the impact of recent funding, and her vision for transforming the fishing industry.

Can you tell us about Sole of Discretion and what led you to found it?

I founded Sole of Discretion in 2016 as a small-scale fish monger working exclusively with low-impact vessels based in Plymouth. Our aim is to provide conscientious consumers with seafood products that are traceable and carefully sourced from small-scale fishers, while rewarding them for their low-impact fishing practices. Through this work, I also hope to influence decision-makers and policy practitioners to recognize the distinction between small-scale fisheries and industrial fisheries, and advocate for the fishing practices and rights of the small-scale sector.

You've been working on developing a seafood industry standard for several years. How did that project begin?

In 2019, SoD collaborated with The New Economic Foundation and researchers from the University of Exeter to develop potential environmental criteria for new standard, while representatives from the Soil Association and the University of Plymouth created social criteria. Fish4ever and SoD then gathered these environmental and social criteria to hypothesise what an industry standard could look like in a retail setting.

The Resilience of Coastal Communities project recently provided £10,000 in pilot funding. How was that funding used?

That's an interesting story. A couple of years ago, I met a filmmaker at an environmental demonstration who wanted to help me create a tangible vision for the industry standard. Initially, I had put the idea aside since I wasn't sure what a video would look like or who it would be for. When the opportunity for the pilot funding emerged from ROCC, I thought it would be a good opportunity to revisit the idea of creating a film.

What impact has the video had so far?

The video has been instrumental in attracting and securing additional funding. During a meeting with the Low Impact Fishers of Europe (LIFE) in Brussels, we submitted a funding bid to the sustainable clothing brand, Patagonia, using the video created with the ROCC pilot funding. In December 2024, we were notified that the grant was successful, and we'll receive £20,000 to develop the industry standard further. These funds will go directly into creating a webpage on LIFE's website for wider distribution and accessibility, and also to employ a project manager to begin getting the industry standard off the ground.

What challenges have you faced in developing this standard?

The COVID-19 pandemic was a significant challenge that stalled the development of the industry standard due to limited funding and attention needing to be prioritised elsewhere. There were also changes in partners as priorities shifted. Initially, the Soil Association was assumed to be the most suitable place to house the seafood industry standard since they are credible and familiar to British consumers. Once we picked the project back up a couple years after the pandemic, the Soil Association was no longer an option. I assume their remit changed during the pandemic and they didn't have the capacity to support a fisheries project with other competing mandates.

How did you overcome these partnership challenges?

Through existing connections, I approached LIFE, who worked closely with Jerry Percy, one of the leads on this project and a longtime advocate of the rights and interests of inshore fishermen. LIFE ultimately ended up being the ideal partner because of their aligned ethos and purpose.

Were there challenges specific to creating the video itself?

Yes, definitely. In the early stages, I had initially wanted a video geared toward policymakers and legislators. After discussions with LIFE, we mutually decided that the video should be produced with securing funding in mind before policy change. Additionally, I had initially envisioned a film that was practical and informative, but the filmmaker I partnered with convinced me that the narrative should take on a more romanticised tone to appeal to people's emotions.

What ongoing challenges do you see in implementing the industry standard?

It's too early to say all the lessons learned, but I suspect there will be several. There are changes that need to be made within fishing itself, but there are also difficulties in getting supply chains and processors to comply with an industry standard.

For example, SoD works exclusively with under-10m boats, but I wonder whether other traders on the quay could qualify for this label when they supply fish from both low-impact and high-impact vessels. Under the industry standard we're developing, is this permissible? And if it is, how can the supply chains for each product be traced to understand with confidence which products are part of this label? I'm not sure how this will be addressed yet.

Despite demand for a seafood label and more sustainable ways of consuming seafood, the structure of industrialized food systems will make it difficult to establish the industry standard. As I see it, we need to change the food systems, really. I can see that even if you've got the best accreditation in the world, how it fits into the food system is going to be a big challenge.

How could this industry standard affect the nexus of wellbeing, resilience, and marine sustainability?

The industry standard has the potential to create several synergies and trade-offs. I admit that it may not result in obvious short-term financial benefits for fishers because post-Brexit, fish prices have been very high. However, I believe in the long term there can be several positive knock-on effects.

Generally, the industry standard could help fishers gain distinction as a unique fishery, thereby empowering them and giving them bargaining power to have access to fishing grounds, increased quotas, or offers of increased financial support. Fishers will be able to qualify for different tiers—bronze, silver, gold—to positively reinforce small-scale fishers to improve their practices.

It aims to be a self-empowering program for small-scale fishers to build networks and partnerships for communities of practice, which can create a domino effect of best fishing practices over time.

Simultaneously, I believe it could also incentivise young fishers to re-enter the industry and bring pride back into fishing as a career. As I put it, it can give people pride and younger people can think 'oh yeah, I don't like sitting behind a computer at school, it really bores me' what else can I do? And fisheries come up as a career [option].

What about benefits for consumers?

I believe it will make it much easier for the conscientious consumer to purchase sustainable seafood and could influence friends and family to do so as well. It also brings more awareness to the issues of fishing, allowing consumers to be better informed about where their fish comes from.

Are there any potential downsides or tensions to consider?

Yes, to accomplish an industry standard, a transition must take place. I wonder how small-scale fishers will be able to adjust since, at the moment, there are only a handful of fishers who are able to produce low-impact fish. When the demand for sustainable seafood grows, how will these fishers be impacted by the influx of more low-impact fishers entering the sector?

Concurrently, if industrial fishing decreases as a result, how can small-scale fishers fill this gap when seafood is taken out of the food system? I believe we need robust and adaptive policies in place to prevent unintended trade-offs emerging from policy decisions that are intended to have positive outcomes.

The primary trade-off for consumers is that sustainable seafood is costly, and many consumers will find it too expensive, which is a shame.

What challenges do small-scale fishers face from industrial fishing?

More needs to be done to restrict the industrial sector from hindering the outcomes for small-scale fishers. Many fishermen in the industry are facing issues of not catching to their quota limits, indicating there is a much bigger issue at hand due to ecosystem degradation from large-scale vessels. Up until now people have managed to catch their quota, but now it's a question of you got your quota but you can't find the fish.

I'm also concerned that even with an industry standard in Europe, it could result in buyers prioritising cheaper fish imported from abroad, making it more difficult for small-scale fishers.

What are the next steps for developing the industry standard?

I'm eager to talk to folks at IFOAM – Organics International – about the Participatory Guarantee Systems (PGS) scheme. I hope to learn more about the schemes since I'm thinking about modelling the industry standard based on PGS. I haven't been able to receive much information from them so far but have connections through the Slow Food Network I'm hoping to draw upon.

As mentioned before, I hope to hire a project manager in six months and predict the timeline for creating the label will take another two years to complete.

Looking further ahead, what's your vision for the next 5-10 years?

In the far future, I would be incredibly pleased to see the label across retailers in Europe and witness a reverse on the decline of small-scale fishers leaving the industry and an increase in new entrants. I would like to see small-scale fishers have a unified voice for policy across all the European member

states to continue advocating for their rights. Additionally, I would like to see more people eat outside of supermarkets to create a more equitable share of wealth to support the local economy.

This interview is based on a conversation with Caroline Bennett, founder of Sole of Discretion, discussing her work on developing a new seafood industry standard with support from the SMMR Resilience of Coastal Communities project.

For more information, visit:

You can review the video [here](#)