

AROUND THE WORLD WITH NORWAY'S NEW GOLD (3)

The "green" salmon

Environmentalists accuse the Norwegian aquaculture industry of stealing the language of the environmental movement.

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Every day, year-round, 16 million meals of "Norwegian" farmed salmon are eaten in Europe, the US and Asia. The marketing of the pink fish often plays on the wild, cold seas, and most Norwegian farming companies can now point to both sustainability reports and environmental certifications.

Norwegian ecophilosophers and environmental organizations, however, believe that the industry's image of farmed salmon is

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Norwegian salmon farming says it contributes to food security, jobs and technological development.

far from the truth, and that the companies' alleged "sustainability work" helps to obscure the public conversation.

- The high mountains, the clear sea - combined with words like "natural habitat" - everything looks so beautiful. No wonder consumers are confused. There is a reason why fish farming companies do not post pictures from below the surface of the cages, says Elida Lenth.

In her recent master's thesis (UiO), she has delved into the reports and marketing of Norwegian fish farming companies. The ecophilosopher is not impressed.

"Sustainability – this huge concept – is being fundamentally redefined and used in new contexts where the meaning is distorted. They make us believe that they are selling a truly sustainable product, and that they are part of the 'solution' to the climate problem," says Lenth.

The fact that the industry, according to the philosopher, "probably believes its own statements" may be due to a deep separation from nature.

- Industry tricks itself into believing that it is collaborating with nature, but in reality it is an anthropomorphization of nature. Nature is given human characteristics, where industry, together with nature, works towards a common goal: profit.

Critics say the industry takes from the poor to give to the rich and destroys marine life.

In this series of articles, we hear from various countries affected by the Norwegian farming industry. The series is supported by Fritt Ord.

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Sam J. Cardoza buys salmon at an organic store in Florida because "the Norwegian salmon comes from wild and clean seas." He is disappointed when he finds out that wild salmon from Norway is very rarely found in stores.



Fredrik Myhre in WWF. (Photo: WWF)

Seafood certifications - not something to hang on the Christmas tree

Fredrik Myhre, marine biologist and senior advisor at WWF, also believes that the Norwegian aquaculture industry has been good at portraying itself as more environmentally friendly than it actually is.

He believes that the environmental labels that companies use are not up to the mark. Despite the fact that WWF once helped develop these environmental labels, certified salmon is no longer recommended in the WWF Seafood Guide.

- Why do MSC and ASC certifications no longer automatically lead to a green light in the seafood guide?

- Because the certifications have not managed to develop good enough environmental requirements over time. Today, there are several certified fisheries and fish farms that WWF is critical of, says Myhre.

- How have the MSC and ASC responded to the criticism?

- The MSC and ASC have been open to dialogue and have had several rounds of revisions to their standards over the years. Unfortunately, this has not led to the improvements we believe need to be made. There has also been resistance among industry players, especially around costs and what environmental requirements should be included in the certifications.

- What assessment has farmed salmon received in the seafood guide?

- Farmed salmon has so far been given the yellow light category, but has so many environmental challenges that it is dangerously close to getting a red light. Salmon production struggles with, among other things, too many sea lice, escapes, drug use and nitrogen emissions. In order to achieve the green light sometime in the future, the salmon must meet much stricter requirements, and there is probably no way around the use of closed technology.

According to Myhre, the Seafood Guide is a consumer tool for finding the most environmentally friendly seafood. Myhre believes the guide provides important consumer power - at the same time, he is cautious about predicting how big an effect WWF's criticism will have internationally.





From FRD's facility in Japan.

- The Japanese are not concerned with sustainability

Professor Yuko Onozaka, at the Stavanger School of Economics, has researched consumers in Japan, the US and France and their attitudes towards salmon. She describes farmed salmon as a very popular food item in all countries - and especially in Japan, where people eat salmon several times a week, even for breakfast and lunch, she says.

The image of Norway as a country with pristine waters and wild nature is strong in Japan, says the researcher. Japanese consumers have a very good impression of Norwegian farmed salmon, which is considered a premium product. The living conditions of farmed salmon are invisible to Japanese consumers, unlike in France and the United States, where controversies surrounding farmed salmon are covered in the media, according to Onozaka.

Seafood certifications are also something that is little known and has little impact on Japanese consumers.

"In the US, consumers are more aware of labels and certifications, and many spend their money to support products they believe are sustainable. The Japanese are primarily concerned with the product being safe to eat and of high quality," she says.



Can Japanese innovation change the game?

But even though Japanese people like Norwegian fish, their respect for national products is even greater, and 70% of Japanese consumers prefer local farmed salmon to imported ones.

Since the sea temperature in Japan in the summer is too high for salmon farming, Japanese farmed salmon comes primarily from land-based facilities. Some farming solutions in Japan are also very exciting from an environmental perspective.



For example, the company FRD has not only managed to produce tasty trout on land, but they have also found a way to deal with the two components that often cause headaches in the land-based industry: waste and water exchange. Tetsuro Sogo, CEO of FRD, explains:

- Our unique biofilter system removes nitrate (NO₃) from the water - something that has been challenging with traditional technology.

The patented technology reduces the need for water exchange to a minimum, with a daily exchange of around 1%, compared to 20-30% in traditional facilities. In addition to providing antibiotic- and parasite-free fish that do not destroy the ocean or wild fish stocks, the energy footprint is significantly reduced.

Sogo, who is optimistic about the future, believes that land-based fish farming can be an important part of the solution to the challenges in the aquaculture industry. But while companies like FRD are inspiring, it will take time before they can become a real game changer.

"The volume of locally produced salmon is significantly smaller than imported Norwegian salmon. It is not yet realistic to replace the entire supply of farmed fish with land-based production," he says.

"The planet cannot withstand growth in the aquaculture industry"

So what is the solution to the challenges, if neither ecolabeling nor innovation is the answer? The Norwegian aquaculture industry also claims that it wants to expand, despite environmental scandals and growing concerns both nationally and internationally.

According to WWF, it is crucial that political framework conditions set clear requirements that the entire industry must follow if sustainable solutions are to become realistic.

"Technology development for aquaculture is not happening fast enough in a free market, and environmental requirements that safeguard nature in the ocean are absolutely crucial to put in place. For salmon farming, this means requirements for zero sea lice, zero escapes and no impact from feed, waste and medications," says Myhre.

Per-Erik Schulze, a marine biologist and expert advisor to the Norwegian Association for the Conservation of Nature, goes considerably further than the WWF. He does not hesitate to use the word "greenwashing" about sustainability certifications and describes the yellow label in the seafood guide as "absurd."

yellow label in the seafood guide as “absurd.”

In a feature article in Seafoodsource, Schulze writes how *“Inspection reports show that hardly any salmon farmers or companies in Norway actually follow the regulations”* and that *“the police’s ecocrime unit has even introduced a new term, “farming crime,” which they classify as a “high-risk” category after repeated violations of the regulations.”*

The Norwegian Federation for the Conservation of Nature, together with seven other Norwegian environmental organizations, has also sent the government clear demands: Norwegian fish farms must become emission-free, and the number of farmed fish in open cages must be reduced along the entire coast. They also demand larger fish farming-free zones and more marine protected areas.

"But stricter regulations should not allow for more growth in the aquaculture industry. We believe that the planet cannot tolerate that," says Schulze.

*

In connection with the case, we have contacted several Norwegian fish farming companies as well as ASC, but have not received a response within the deadline.

Farm Animal Investment Risk and Return (FAIRR) publishes the world’s only comprehensive assessment of the largest animal protein producers in terms of critical risks. MOWI has been among the top companies in this assessment for the past six years. FAIRR commented:

How does FAIRR assess the sustainability challenges in salmon farming?

FAIRR: The aquaculture industry, and salmon farming in particular, faces major sustainability challenges, including pollution, disease, fish welfare violations and reliance on wild-caught fish for feed production. Through our Sustainable Aquaculture Investor Initiative, we are working to address these challenges, particularly in the area of feed, by engaging with some of the largest salmon farming companies. We encourage them to improve their practices and promote more sustainable development in the industry.

What does FAIRR think about the importance of certifications?

FAIRR: Certifications can be a useful tool in sustainability strategies, but they do not necessarily provide full insight into issues such as feed origin and fish welfare. True sustainability requires holistic, digital and interconnected traceability throughout the value chain to ensure real accountability.

How does FAIRR follow up on companies like Mowi and Grieg Seafood?

FAIRR: We engage with MOWI and Grieg Seafood through our Sustainable Aquaculture Investor Initiative, but we do not inspect the facilities directly. Our assessments are based

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