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Breakthrough for more welfare of farmed fish

For twenty years, the Swiss association fair-fish has been fighting for the consideration of the natural needs of fishes kept in captivity. We made ourselves unpopular at first. We were laughed at in fish farming circles when we did not let go of our demands. And now it's suddenly true: the leading sustainability labels in fish farming have set out to extend their guidelines to include fish welfare criteria.

Open race for fish welfare guidelines

The pressure exerted for years by fair-fish and friendly organisations such as Vischenbescherming in the Netherlands, Compassion in World Farming in the United Kingdom, and the umbrella organisation Eurogroup for Animals in Brussels has paved the way for this. And the California based organisation, the Open Philanthropy Project is now providing the fuel for the journey into the future: it promotes the development and introduction of fish welfare guidelines within the framework of the most important labels for sustainable fish.



fair-fish, FishEthoBase and Friend of the Sea

Thanks to the Open Philanthropy Project, a real race for the best fish welfare is now underway. The FishEthoBase research team of fair-fish international elaborates criteria for the label "Friend of the Sea" (FOS), and deliberately in a pragmatic approach from the production point of view: The researchers, who have their own practical experience, start by observing and advising on the FOS-certified fish farms. They want to find out where the problems lie and how fish welfare can be improved. Only on the basis of this experience will they finally formulate feasible and auditable fish welfare criteria that they recommend for integration into the FOS standard. FOS wants to make fish welfare criteria mandatory for all certified farms after a voluntary transition period.



Other certification schemes to compete

The second label in the race is the WWF launched "Aquaculture Stewardship Council" (ASC). The principles of the ASC Guidelines were developed by WWF in an exemplary stakeholder process. fair-fish had taken part in it and demanded repeatedly, but in vain to include fish welfare criteria. With a petition launched in autumn 2016 and signed by 22,884 persons, fair-fish Switzerland again demanded that the ASC integrates fish welfare criteria in its standard. Good to see that something is beginning to move now!

ASC chooses a different, more marketing-oriented approach. The requirements will be developed in cooperation with the University of Wageningen, food traders and animal welfare organisations as well as in market tests. They will then be made available as a voluntary module to all ASC certified companies.

Two other certification schemes will be running as well, the Global Aquaculture Alliance (GAA) and the Global Animal Partnership (GAP), whose approaches will hopefully be different again.

Inspiring competition of ideas

We welcome the simultaneity and diversity of the approaches to solutions. Thanks to this competition of ideas, we will finally come up with criteria that can be applied to fish farms worldwide and will improve the welfare of billions of fish. We don't expect miracles. The enormous deficits in fish welfare that we have identified with the FishEthoBase will only be partially repaired – the important thing is to start with it. Once the train goes in the direction of fish welfare, it is likely to reach destinations that are still considered utopian today. We are very grateful to The Open Philanthropy Project for supporting this development.

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