

7.1 CONSUMER PERCEPTION VERSUS SCIENTIFIC EVIDENCE OF FARMED AND WILD FISH: EXPLORATORY INSIGHTS IN BELGIUM

Isabel De Lange¹, Wim Verbeke¹, Isabelle Sioen^{2,3}, John Van Camp², Stefaan De Henauw³ and Karen Brunso⁴

¹ Department of Agricultural Economics, Ghent University, Coupure Links 653, 9000 Gent, Belgium.

² Department of Food Technology and Nutrition, Ghent University, Coupure Links 653, 9000 Gent, Belgium.

³ Department of Public Health, Ghent University, Coupure Links 653, 9000 Gent, Belgium.

⁴ MAPP Centre, The Aarhus School of business, Haslegaardsvej 10, DK-8210 Aarhus, Denmark

Isabel De Lange: Tel. +32 92646204, Fax +32 92646246, E-mail: Isabel.Delange@Ugent.be

ABSTRACT

The consumption of fish and derived fish products has increased over recent decades. First of all, fish can be considered as an important healthy part of the daily diet because of the presence of omega-3 (n-3) fatty acids, vitamin D and proteins with a high biological value. Fish demand is increasing as a direct result of the increasing world population, the overall higher living standards and the health image of fish among consumers too. Unfortunately, widespread unsustainable fishing practices have left capture fisheries with a shrinking resource base. In result, consumers are now being proposed farmed fish as an alternative. Fish farming has, like other kinds of livestock operations, several decided market advantages over the commercial hunting of wild animals. Farmers can have far greater control over timing, consistency and quantity of production than fishermen do. They also have the opportunity to anticipate consumers' wishes by constructing new fish farming production sites and appropriate marketing. The strength or weakness for aquaculture in comparison with fish capture from nature depends largely on the production method used.

In this study, we explore the differences in consumer perception versus available scientific evidence about food quality and safety issues related to wild versus farmed fish. Cross-sectional consumer data were initially collected through a consumer survey in Belgium during March-April 2003. Respondents were personally contacted and asked to complete a self-administered anonymous questionnaire. The total sample consisted of 429 respondents and was composed of 284 women (66.2%) and 145 men (33.8%). In May 2004, additional primary data were collected through focus group discussions organised within the EU-FP6 SEAFOODplus project. The scientific evidence about wild versus farmed fish quality and safety is based on literature review.

The results of the Belgian survey in 2003 showed that consumers have more positive thoughts about wild fish with respect to taste, health and nutritional value. Only with respect to the attribute availability, consumers hold a perception in favour of farmed fish. Consumer perception did not differ significantly on perceived safety and versatility. When comparing scientific evidence from literature review with consumer perceptions, the gap seems to be biggest for the healthy and safety character of fish. Health and safety issues are the items with the highest degree of ambiguity in scientific literature, mainly because the safety and healthiness of farmed fish depends largely on the farming conditions.

The exploratory findings from literature review, the Belgian survey in 2003 and the focus groups in Belgium, will be validated using the cross-national and representative SEAFOODplus consumer survey performed in November-December 2004. Within this survey, data were collected from Belgium, Denmark, Poland, Spain and The Netherlands. The dataset has only lately become available, hence prohibiting validation on time for drafting this abstract. Nevertheless, findings from the consumer survey will be used and presented in order to validate the exploratory insights described before, and draw more robust conclusions and recommendations with respect to market positioning of farmed versus wild fish.