

Connecting fishers and scientists in the sustainability debate: The interactive VALDUVIS sustainability web tool

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The sustainability of fishing practices is considered a delicate subject within the Belgian fishing community. Invitations to openly discuss this issue with scientists are generally met with reluctance. Some fishers even have the tendency to disclaim certain scientific results when it comes to ecosystem impact of fishing operations. This climate of distrust does not stimulate the cooperation between science and the fishing sector. This is partly reflected in a poor uptake of newly developed fishing gear adaptations which lower the impact of the fishing activity. The VALDUVIS project strives to counter this adverse mentality by making 'sustainability' a discussible issue between researchers and fishers.

VALDUVIS is an indicator-based tool to assess the sustainability of fishing activities, tailor-made for the Belgian fishing sector to initiate the transition towards more sustainability fishing practices (Kinds, 2015). The scores for 14 different indicators are visually aggregated into one chart, combining the three pillars of sustainability (environmental, social and economic sustainability). VALDUVIS uses detailed descriptions of fishers' actions as recorded in the electronic logbook to make trip-based sustainability assessments. This level of detail is based on the premise that fishers greatly differ in their fishing tactics (e.g. gear modifications, preference for a certain species mix or fish size) and that two fishing trips are never the same (e.g. tow duration, towing speed and choice of fishing ground). VALDUVIS enables Belgian fishers to make founded statements about the sustainability of their catch, based on official data and by using a scientifically approved methodology. 'Sustainability' is a product feature that is becoming an important factor to ensure access to the retail market. Fishers are increasingly being aware of this evolution and are therefore willing to learn more about their performances.

This information can be accessed by fishermen through an interactive VALDUVIS sustainability web tool for the Belgian fishing sector. Each individual Belgian fisher can gain access to his personal page on the VALDUVIS web portal (www.valduvis.be). Once registered and logged in, each fisher can request all sustainability scores for each fishing trip or combination of fishing trips (e.g. year 2015) for the past 3 years. The tool is designed in such a way that it permits 'learning' actions: comparisons with the average performance of the Belgian fleet are possible, as well as comparisons of individual performances over the years, implications of a shift in fishing practices, etc. Fishers are also welcome to discuss their scores with the scientific VALDUVIS team. These assessments can provide insight into the sustainability of their own actions and choices in comparison to other fishers. This may lead to the identification of unsustainable practices in their own businesses (self-assessment) and provide opportunities for knowledge exchange and learning (Rogge, 2009). Researchers from ILVO will identify best practices and directed actions along the way and guide fishers towards a higher degree of sustainability.

VALDUVIS offers an interactive learning tool for fishers to 'discover' the sustainability of their practices in an approachable way and provides guidance towards best practices. At the same time, VALDUVIS has facilitated the opening of the sustainability debate between fishers and scientist.

References

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