

# VALDUVIS, a new way of assessing and communicating the sustainability of fishing activities

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Numerous seafood guides, labels and certification schemes have emerged over the past decades, and their number is still growing. Although with the best intentions to inform consumers about sustainable seafood choices, this excess has often resulted in consumer confusion (Jacquet and Pauly, 2006). Since recently, however, considerable effort is being put into aligning and benchmarking these initiatives (e.g. Vos *et al.*, 2010; Food & Water Europe, 2011; Sys, 2013; Melissant *et al.*, 2014). Pressure groups are lobbying for a European standard for sustainable seafood based upon the FAO guidelines for aquaculture and fisheries certification, instead of leaving it to private labels (e.g. Food & Water Europe, Brot für die Welt).

On top of the need for aligning and benchmarking existing certification schemes, the Institute for Agricultural and Fisheries Research (ILVO) calls for a rethinking of data gathering and a broader reach of these schemes. Certification schemes either focus on consumers (e.g. Friend of the Sea, the Marine Stewardship Council) or on businesses (e.g. Label Rouge, GLOBALG.A.P.), but hardly ever the same standards are used to inform both.

There is a growing demand for sustainably caught fish on the Belgian market. However, retailers are now importing sustainable (labeled) fish from Iceland or Norway, as sustainability information for Belgian fisheries is lacking. Sustainable seafood guides (e.g. de VISwijzer) offer a handy tool for the environmentally conscient consumer, but are not accepted by the Belgian fishing sector because they use generalized information to score fishing techniques. On the sector's demand, we have developed a set of indicators and a scoring system (called VALDUVIS) that takes into account local characteristics and uses of fishing gears, gear adaptations and socio-economic aspects of the fishery. The system is developed in such a way that it is ready for use in other European member states.

The VALDUVIS method (Valorisation of Sustainably Caught Fish) constitutes a holistic and fairly cheap approach to assess the sustainability of a fishing trip. Under EU legislation, fisheries data collection is organized. As such, fishermen use an electronic logbook system to report their catches to their local governments. VALDUVIS uses these data sources to automatically generate sustainability scores, which are available to fish mongers soon after landing the catch. Socio-economic indicators are calculated on a quarterly or yearly basis. By using existing and reliable data sources, VALDUVIS goes past the issue of the high audit costs of most schemes. VALDUVIS thus generates an invaluable source of information that can be used by fishermen, researchers, policy makers, retailers, certification bodies, etc. to communicate about sustainability in the same standardized way. VALDUVIS is an information tool that can be used in various ways, depending on the needs of the users. Great emphasis is placed on stakeholder participation and most notably feedback to and from fishermen.

ILVO wants to take a lead in aligning sustainability standards and in making reliable sustainability information accessible throughout the production chain. The aim of the sustainable seafood movement goes beyond demonstrating best practices to obtain a better price or improved market access. The ultimate goal is a worldwide shift towards sustainability, which cannot come from private initiatives alone (Kaiser and Jones, 2006; Jacquet *et al.*, 2009).

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