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Bringing aquatic foods into UK food systems debates

Workshop Report

7th March 2024

City, University of London

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1. Introduction

On March 7th 2024, The Marine Conservation Society, the International Institute for Environment & Development (IIED), and the Centre for Food Policy, City, University of London convened a workshop on 'bringing aquatic foods into UK food systems debates'.

This document provides a detailed account of the discussions, and presents the outputs of the activities. Finally, it also provides some suggestions for next steps.

The aims of the workshop were to:

1. Identify policy-relevant research gaps preventing blue foods from being included in work on the UK food system transition.
2. Highlight areas and opportunities for collaboration.
3. Scope interest in creating a UK network to share insights, secure research funding and advocate for aquatic foods in the food policy landscape.

The half-day workshop brought together 23 people from 17 organisations. Workshop attendees came from a mix of backgrounds, including academia, non-governmental organisations and campaigning organisations, donor organisations and funding bodies, and independent consultants. A list of participant organisations is provided at the end of the report. The workshop was run under Chatham House rules.

The workshop aimed to build on existing work at the international level, including by colleagues based in the UK, to bring greater attention to the contribution of aquatic foods to food system outcomes, and to advocate for their inclusion in food systems decision-making. We aim to build on work by the ['Blue Food Assessment'](#), a global coalition of scientists and experts who have conducted original research into the production, consumption and trade of aquatic foods, including their nutrient composition and environmental performance.

The workshop addressed two high-level questions through three facilitated sessions:

- What are the barriers to integrating aquatic foods in debates about UK food systems?
- What research gaps need to be addressed to bring aquatic foods into these debates?

Below, we summarise the discussions in each of the three moderated sessions. Finally, in Section 5, 'Next Steps,' we suggest 3 initiatives to take forward through collaboration.

A note on terms and usage

For consistency and clarity, we use the term 'aquatic foods' to refer to animals, plants and algae that have been harvested from or farmed in aquatic environments. However, we acknowledge that several other terms were used in discussions with the same or similar meanings, e.g., 'blue foods,' 'seafood,' 'aquatic foods' and 'fish.'

2. Barriers to integrating aquatic foods in food systems debates

The first session aimed to identify barriers to bringing aquatic foods into food systems transformations agendas across research, policy, and advocacy. We asked participants to reflect on the following questions:

- If you work on seafood, do you see yourself as part of bigger food systems transformation debates? If not, why not?
- If you work on food systems, do you consider seafood in your work? If not, why not?
- What has been your experience of bridging the gap between seafood and wider food systems work, if any?
- What do you think the barriers are to integrating seafood into food systems transformations agendas across research, policy, advocacy?

In Table 1, we have summarised and mapped out the barriers that participants identified against the two key challenges, highlighting themes that are relevant to both:

Table 1. Barriers to aquatic food challenges

Barrier	Challenge	
	Integrating aquatic foods in food systems debates	Increasing aquatic food consumption in the UK
Visibility and Perception		
“Out of Sight, Out of Mind”		
Separation from the Land		
Cultural preferences and influence of cultural norms		
Cultural invisibility of aquatic species		
Negative press & perceptions of aquatic food industries		
Policy and Expertise		
Lack of alliances and collaboration between stakeholders from food and aquatic foods sectors		
Defra Expertise Gap		
Separation from Other Food Policies		
Inadequate health and nutrition recommendations		
Role of middle chain actors		
Culture and Innovation		
Making aquatic foods more palatable through innovative processing		
Cultural considerations in consumption		
Nuanced approach to food production and consumption		
Political and Economic Factors		
Comparative low influence of fishing lobby		

Impact of UK-EU relation on aquatic food policies		
Economic gain vs. food source		
Access and Data		
Understanding decline in supermarket sales and implications for access		
Food security conversations focus on land		
Carbon aquatic foods data gap		
Implementation Challenges		
Opportunities to integrate aquatic foods don't always translate into practical implementation		
Defining the endpoint		
Status quo and representation of different voices		
Structural Considerations		
Aquaculture and silos in aquatic food sector		
Diversity in aquatic foods and in fisheries methods		
Balancing sustainability and nutrition		
Policy and Labor Issues		
Better policies and decision-making		
Avoid polarizing farming and fishing		
Perspectives on imports vs. local production		
Addressing workforce issues related to migration		

Visibility and Perception:

- **Out of Sight, Out of Mind:** Aquatic foods are often overlooked because it's not as physically visible as land-based meats. This lack of visibility affects considerations related to animal welfare and product consumption.
- **Separation from the Land:** Food from the ocean is perceived separately from the land, affecting considerations like animal welfare and consumption frequency. Negative perceptions of farmed fish persist, despite outdated data from the 1980s. Nuanced understanding is lacking.
- **Cultural Influence:** In the UK, ease of cooking aquatic foods is a challenge due to cultural preferences/norms for meat. Recent research indicates that younger individuals are less likely to consume aquatic foods. Efforts to promote aquatic foods need to address these preferences.
- **Invisibility to Aquatic foods:** Societal disconnect and invisibility surround aquatic foods, especially compared to land-based foods. The image of salmon in a Scottish net pen doesn't evoke the same ideas as a lamb in a field. Understanding this disconnect is crucial.
- **Industry Perception and Negative Press:** Aquatic foods industries are perceived negatively, something that can be amplified through social media, mainstream media campaigns and documentaries. These portrayals contribute to a fear factor around the impact of aquatic foods on health and the planet.

Policy and Expertise:

- **Lack of Alliances:** There's insufficient collaboration between food and aquatic foods stakeholders
- **Defra Expertise Gap:** Lack of expertise within Defra regarding aquatic foods. As the UK navigates post-Brexit policies, this could either be a barrier or an opportunity for aquatic foods integration. Defra's consideration of aquaculture remains unclear, leading to questions about where it fits in the broader context.
- **Separation from Other Food Policies:** Aquatic foods is often treated as a separate entity, disconnected from broader food policies. Little interaction exists between aquatic foods stakeholders and the rest of the food system.
- **Health and Nutrition Recommendations:** Insufficient recommendations related to aquatic foods in health and nutrition. Recommendations often don't go beyond advocating for two portions of aquatic foods per week.
- **Middle Chain Actors:** The focus has predominantly been on fishers and farmers, but middle chain actors (e.g., processors, distributors) play crucial roles. Their perspectives and challenges deserve attention.

Culture and Innovation:

- **Ultra-Processed Food Innovation gap:** Exploring innovative ways to make aquatic foods more palatable.
- **Cultural Considerations:** Different food cultures impact aquatic food consumption.
- **Nuance Needed:** Acknowledging that tinned mussels may not suit everyone.

Political and Economic Factors:

- **Fishing Lobby Influence:** The fishing lobby wields political clout. But may have less than other agricultural sectors (e.g., farming) to be integrated into policy.
- **EU Relationship:** Post-2024 election, the EU relationship may impact aquatic foods policies.
- **Economic Gain vs. Food Source:** Aquatic foods is primarily seen as an economic asset or livelihood rather than a fundamental food source for the country.

Access and Data:

- **Supermarket Sales Decline:** Supermarkets sell less fish than before. Fewer ways for wider population to access diverse aquatic foods. Understanding supermarket practices and barriers is essential for effective integration.
- **Terrestrial Focus:** Food security conversations primarily focus on terrestrial foods and issues.
- **Carbon Data Gap:** Limited detailed carbon data for aquatic foods.

Implementation Challenges:

- **Opportunity vs. Implementation:** Opportunities exist but don't always translate into practical implementation. There are opportunities for change, translating them into research, media coverage, and practical implementation remains challenging. The path to fully integrating aquatic foods into food systems feels distant.
- **Defining the Endpoint:** Uncertainty about where the integration of aquatic foods into food systems will lead.

- **Status Quo and Fishing Voice:** The largest fishing voices often maintain the status quo, benefiting from existing systems. This may hinder transformative changes needed for a more secure and nutritious food system.

Structural Considerations:

- **Aquaculture and Fisheries Silos:** Clarifying where aquaculture and capture fisheries fit within policy structures.
- **Negative Media Impact:** Industry faces negative media portrayal.
- **Aquatic Foods Diversity and Fishing Types:** Recognizing diversity among species of fish, shellfish and aquatic plants, and between different fishing methods.
- **Balancing Sustainability and Nutrition:** Striking a balance between sustainability (e.g., Green Stewardship Council) and nutritional needs is critical for effective aquatic foods integration.

Policy and Labor Issues:

- **Better Policies and Decision-Making:** Advocating for improved policies and decision-making.
- **Farming and Fishing Not Polarized:** Avoiding polarized framing.
- **Import vs. Local Production:** Balancing perspectives on import and local production. What does “local” mean, and who benefits from it?
- **Labor and Migration Tensions:** Addressing workforce issues related to migration.

3. Mapping research gaps

This session aimed to identify policy- and practice-oriented research gaps that could help to bring aquatic foods into food systems transformation debates in the UK. We asked participants to note down ideas in answer to these two questions:

- What do you want / need to know to bring aquatic foods into the conversation?
- What kind of research could address these questions?

The topics and questions proposed reflected the dual interest of participants in understanding the barriers to both integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates, and increasing aquatic foods consumption in the UK. Gaps that appeared to target low aquatic food consumption, specifically, were aimed at understanding and informing behaviour change interventions, particularly aquatic food purchasing behaviours. Other gaps that were identified related to evidence on the price, and price elasticity, of aquatic foods, and issues around aquatic food affordability.

Suggestions that addressed the broader challenge of integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates, and relatedly, the role of aquatic foods within UK food systems, didn't just suggest topics for research but also ideas for intervention. For example, there were suggestions to influence, as well as understand, policy related to both aquatic foods and the broader food system, including mechanisms for more joined-up food / fisheries policies.

Political will for a food strategy was identified as an important gap that could be addressed through advocacy and influence. In the supply chain, there are gaps in our understanding of the processing, logistics and manufacturing capabilities for aquatic foods in the UK; in how to scale small initiatives; and in evidence that could improve innovation around aquatic food products, to increase diversity and availability, as well as consumer appeal.

Another area where the gap was connected to intervention was primary production, and specifically, questions about how to support producers of low trophic level species, as well as specific production systems, such as circular systems. There are perceived gaps in data on the economic, environmental, and nutritional impacts (positive and negative) of aquatic foods, including overseas environmental impacts of aquatic foods consumed in the UK. This data would also enable comparative analysis of the benefits of trade in aquatic foods, as well as comparisons of aquatic foods and terrestrial foods.

Finally, participants identified gaps around issues of justice and equitability, related to aquatic foods and the ocean, as well as unequal power dynamics in aquatic food sectors. Beyond gaps in data, there was also a perceived need for participatory research and collaborative methods, working with citizens, aquatic foods sector stakeholders, and retailers.

Below is a detailed list of post-it notes written by participants:

Policy/Politics

- What is the commitment we want the next government to make on aquatic foods and why?
- How can academia/civil society be part of influencing more ethical/beneficial political decisions, e.g., PR campaigns
- Better understanding of structural barriers in decision/policy making in Whitehall

- Political will for holistic food strategy
- Making the food system and integration a core business area for food industry levy bodies in the UK
- Review of blue food in context of Fisheries Act 2020 objectives
- Cabinet Minister for food systems
- Food systems considered strongly in Internal Markets Act
- How might a closer relationship with the EU (under a future govt) improve/inflame issues? Mechanisms identified to drive join up between fisheries policy i.e. fisheries act & food policy
- Understanding limitations of food systems/policy change within the context of role of inequality in shaping food availability/choice
- Scotland – Good Food Nation Act includes Local food plans (developed by local authorities and health boards)

Trade and supply chains

- What are the overseas impacts of the UK's aquatic food system? How can we improve them?
- Trade-value analysis & trade overseas – economic analysis
- Trade analysis – what can we get from overseas fishing sustainably?
- How do we ensure we keep overseas markets from being damaged?
- Have better data on baseline trade and consumption, plus environmental impacts, so we know how and by how much we need to improve
- Benefits of local vs global seafood sourcing
- How do supply chains + markets adapt to enable scale? What skills & tech do we need?
- How do we include retailers in the conversation?
- Supply chain gap – e.g. deshelling bivalves – manufacturers need large volumes of fresh, shell-less product.
- Mapping/gap analysis of UK processing/logistics (that limit for now)

Price and affordability

- What role does price/demand elasticity play? E.g. If other proteins/meat became more expensive?
- Why are aquatic foods expensive?
- How can the UK consumer afford the recommended amount?
- How do we empower people, especially in lower socio-economic groups, to eat more aquatic foods?

Just Transition and ethics

- How do we balance out concentration of capital?
- How is food justice best served in the context of aquatic foods?
- How do we use the ocean more equitably?
- Why do we accept food loss from large amounts of fish dying in the fish farms?
- Solutions to increase welfare at time of killing – wild & farmed fish

Methods

- Citizen science projects / social labs
- Co-designed research (with funding to support participants)
- Local co-designed & participatory research – bringing aquatic food actors together to co-define what seafood within a Good Food Nation (sustainable, nutritious, just) looks like in their area and how local food plans can support this (Scotland)
- Peer to peer mentoring across institutions

Production

- How do we support lower trophic level producers, e.g. oyster/seaweed farmers?
- Increase choice for aquatic food products
- More/better product development
- Help with upscaling of small initiatives
- Review food R&D in different cultures/countries to learn new food format possibilities
- Innovation in seafood producers
- Enabling more circular systems to better integrate multitrophic and aquaculture into land to reduce waste, improve efficiency & sustainability
- Climate change adaptation for diverse aquaculture + fishing in different local contexts

Behaviour change and consumer interventions

- All nutrition, public health & environment education has a blue food component
- How can we make small oily fish 'sexy' & diversify diets?
- How to maximise the use of social media users (reach the young)?
- How best to nudge consumers to aquatic foods
- How to present data/info to consumers on seafood vs animals vs plants
- How to build consumption habits throughout life course
- Engaging more social scientists in discussions on barriers to fish consumption
- Avoiding ultra-processed, but making fish more attractive – research with public to look at attributes
- Why do people lack knowledge on how to prepare aquatic foods?
- Changing behaviour to enable public to eat more fish – research focus on behaviours, investigating why consumption of fish low public health/nutritional aspects
- What product forms would consumers eat?
- How can we start eating small-scale catch?
- Age & income focused promotion of aquatic foods
- Better integrating consumer attributes + preferences

Consumption

- Utilisation -> how to make British seafood more appealing?
- How seafood fits into discussions on substituting foods in diets
- AI data gathering on seafood consumption & health outcomes, e.g. Zoe
- How can we/supermarkets encourage consumption of lower trophic level species-seaweed/bivalves
- More information on the substitutability of seafood with terrestrial food, not simply in terms of consumption, but also along the food supply chain.
- Can we move to new fish types for UK consumption

- Cultural dimensions of blue foods

Evidence and data

- Scenarios on how the recommended seafood consumption in the UK can be met:
- domestic vs imported, farmed vs wild
- Need for more real-world consumer trials with fish & seafood interventions, rather than desk-based studies
- Need a way to accrue evidence for sustainability of seafood, envtal/GHG/water etc
- How does seafood fit into debates around protein sustainability?
- Data gap - how to compare nutrition & sustainability impacts between terrestrial and aquatic foods?

Food systems

- Land use debate & challenges – how and where does aquaculture fit into this in the UK?
- Local food system dreams
- “Seafood”, not farmed vs wild as framing
- Contextualising seafood, especially in discussions/research around the protein transition

4. Plenary discussion

The closing plenary discussion reprised some of the issues and themes raised throughout the workshop. Participants were also asked to respond to the organisers' idea to create a network or coalition around integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates in the UK. The discussion centred on *strategies for integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates* as well as *ideas for how these could be taken forward* collaboratively. These are summarised below Table 2.

Participants returned to a discussion of the barriers to integrating aquatic foods raised in Section 2 in more detail, but also suggested possible solutions. Table 2 below maps some of these against each other.

Table 2. Challenges and possible corresponding solutions to integrating aquatic foods in food systems debates in the UK.

Challenge	Solution
Differences and disconnect between fisheries and aquaculture. E.g., All-Party Parliamentary Group (APPG) on Fisheries focuses on fisheries, leaving aquaculture without a voice in government. Fisheries and aquaculture production also entail different regulations, systems and processes.	Recognising the differences between fisheries and aquaculture, even while bringing them together under the 'blue food' umbrella, is important for effective policymaking.
Aquatic food systems are perceived as 'too complicated' to include in food systems debates.	Compelling metrics related to health and sustainability can be used to highlight their relevance. E.g., evidence of potential for aquatic food consumption to reduce incidence of diet-related diseases, such as type 2 diabetes.
Devolution of food, agriculture and fisheries and differences between nations, e.g., production systems are different, and funding does not always encourage a whole-of-UK approach to blue foods.	Accounting for the nuances of, and differences between, each devolved nation's aquatic food systems.
There is no dedicated lobbying organisation advocating for the business of aquatic foods consumption in the UK.	Advocacy and lobbying could contribute to bringing aquatic foods into food systems policy and industry dialogues.

1. Strategies for integrating aquatic foods into food systems debates

Invite 'unusual suspects' into aquatic food conversations. While the workshop focused on getting aquatic foods into food systems debates, one suggested strategy was to involve individuals who haven't typically engaged with 'blue foods' into these spaces, to encourage greater dialogue. Engaging with a diverse group of stakeholders around aquatic foods, e.g., school food decision-makers, media representatives, and hospitality workers, can lead to those actors 'translating' or 'transporting' aquatic foods in their respective food system

spaces. Charismatic and influential ‘champions’ can also help to bridge the gap between aquatic foods and the rest of the food system, and facilitate the exchange of information and perspectives. Actively reaching out to and involving key actors from the agricultural sector, including experts and researchers, was also suggested as a strategy to raise the profile of aquatic foods within broader food systems spaces and bridge the gap between these two systems.

Learn from initiatives in other sectors and from previous experience. Several participants suggested learning from the successes and failures of previous initiatives to raise the profile of aquatic foods within policy, or to increase aquatic food consumption in the UK. Some also suggested learning from initiatives in other sectors, for example, the Fruit and Veg Alliance which brings together industry voices and advocates, with the aim of influencing policy. A parallel voice for aquatic foods could be one strategy to integrate aquatic foods into food systems decision-making.

Position aquatic foods and aquatic food experts within food systems debates. One participant suggested that to ensure aquatic foods are being included in conversations about food systems, people should position or frame themselves as ‘food systems experts’ with a focus or specialism in aquatic foods – just as others might have a focus on crop farming or diets. There was some discussion of the relative merits of networking around aquatic foods specifically, compared with championing aquatic foods within existing food systems networks. For example, some participants are members of food networks, and suggested it could be more strategic to leverage existing groups, rather than creating new and potentially isolated bubbles of discussion.

Have a shared vision for aquatic foods. There was some discussion around the possibility of developing a shared vision at different levels of the food system for aquatic foods, and how they fit into food systems. There was acknowledgement that there might be different perspectives on this depending on what is being ‘envisioned’.

Create more nimble groups. In response to the idea to set up a network on aquatic foods in the UK, participants discussed what existing organisations and groups are doing in this space and some of their limitations. While there was agreement on the need to avoid reinventing the wheel and create further ‘echo chambers’, there was also acknowledgement that existing organisations are limited in the kinds of activities they can carry out. For example, levy bodies for agriculture and fisheries/aquaculture typically do not speak to one another and cannot lobby. It was suggested that any new network would need to be ‘nimble’ to both work beyond traditional boundaries, and to navigate long-term funding challenges.

2. Tackling specific issues in aquatic food systems

There was further discussion of specific issues related to aquatic foods and the broader food system, including:

- Shifting food consumption patterns and their relationship to demographics, for example, younger generations are reducing their meat consumption, but also do not eat that much seafood. Relatedly, there were discussions about how to target different demographics in initiatives related to increasing aquatic food consumption, for example through positioning aquatic foods as sustainable and nutritious alternatives, and through working with schools and public procurement.

- Reducing waste related to aquatic food production and consumption, both related to catch sector as well as in processing and at household level.
- Issues related to aquatic food processing, including how to include large-scale manufacturers and processors in these conversations, as well as gaps in processing and their connection to consumption patterns.
- How to define a 'good blue food system', including issues around local access and global trade, sustainable sourcing, and accessibility.

3. How to move forward?

Our discussions centred on the value of continuing to communicate and interact as a wide group of experts, practitioners and stakeholders working around aquatic foods moving forward. The value of a knowledge sharing network was debated, including its potential to shape a unified voice, to create opportunities for peer-mentoring and cross-sector or international collaboration and learning, which could all contribute towards enhancing research, policy, and practice.

Opportunities to come together with a bigger group of people were discussed, including a possible second Seafood Matters conference (first held in June 2022). In terms of who else to bring into the conversation – ideas included levy bodies, agricultural experts, industry actors, policymakers, and decision-makers.

Collaborations with UKRI and philanthropic organisations were discussed; the successes of earlier similar initiatives, such as the Food Research Collaboration, were mentioned – including their cost model and partnership model/composition.

The importance of engaging mindfully with other groups and individuals who have been working in this space for a long time was acknowledged; for example, one participant suggested it would be critical to work collaboratively with different actors in aquatic foods sectors, and to respect the expertise that actors across these sectors have. Similarly, there was enthusiasm for aligning efforts across different policy areas, including by working with local government and coastal communities. Aligning with other policy timelines, for example the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and election cycles could also be strategic.

Finally, one of the main points of discussion was around the very ambition of bringing aquatic foods into broader food systems debates, and the need to clarify what 'problem' this would aim to solve in the UK context. One individual suggesting that having a clear, shared vision or purpose could help to refine the scope of future policy, research, and advocacy efforts in this space. Another suggestion was to have metrics for success – whether it is around awareness-raising, policy change or consumption.

5. Next steps

We propose taking forward 3 initiatives:

1. Establishing a knowledge-exchange network.

We propose to co-design and secure funding for a cross-sector platform spanning industry, research and policy, loosely modelled on the [Food Research Collaboration](#). The platform's objectives would be to raise the profile of aquatic foods in research and policy on food systems in the UK; to bridge the gap between evidence on aquatic and terrestrial food systems; and to inform policy and practice on food systems. The platform would likely take the form of a steering group and secretariat to coordinate day-to-day activities, with regular inputs from a wider network of stakeholders. Activities could include strategic research communications, targeted policy influencing, networking events, and mentorship schemes to facilitate greater collaboration across 'blue' and 'green' food systems work.

2. Coordinating proposals on increasing aquatic food production/consumption.

We suggest keeping in touch to collaborate on proposals related to research gaps on the challenges, opportunities and impacts of shifting aquatic food production/consumption for improved food systems outcomes. We can set up an email distribution list, regular online meeting or LinkedIn group to facilitate sharing of proposals and scoping of interest.

3. Investing in aquatic foods in further education.

Several different initiatives could support the integration of aquatic foods into food systems approaches through further education, to ensure that the next generation of food systems scholars, practitioners and decision-makers are thinking about aquatic foods as part of the food system. This could take the form of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) or summer school, or a series of webinars, through a university or other research institution.

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