As a new decade dawns, seafood seems poised to have its moment. The seafood category has all the right stuff for it to become the preferred protein of the future – it’s supported by nutrition and food systems research, consumer preferences, and global trends in health, technology, product delivery, and more.

One of the healthiest proteins to consume, seafood is also sustainable to produce, and it’s got backing from a growing field of research surrounding “blue food systems,” which highlights the category’s importance to the future of the planet and its ever-expanding bevy of consumers.

The message is clear across many channels: Seafood sustainability offers a way forward, for people and the earth. SeafoodSource, the official media for Seafood Expo events, is launching a new program, Seafood2030, aimed at investigating and addressing the issues, challenges, and successes impacting seafood’s sustainable future.

Over the course of two years, the program will look into issues related to assured supply, supply chain risk, and consumer trends shaping seafood’s path forward, as well as how and where this industry has been successful in delivering the protein of the future to global consumers and markets. Through its work, Seafood2030 will elevate a wealth of success stories detailing how the industry can not only mitigate its environmental impact, but drive improvement in the health of stocks and ecosystems, affect people and communities positively, and ultimately, provide a healthy protein to feed the global marketplace.

Food for thought
A number of precedent-setting research and collaborative ventures have informed Seafood2030’s framework. The EAT-Lancet Report, produced by the Stockholm Resilience Center, is among these influential forces. The report is one of the first to look into the link between a healthy diet for people and a healthy diet for the planet.

“Food is the single strongest lever to optimize human health and environmental sustainability on earth. However, food is currently threatening both people and planet. An immense challenge facing humanity is to provide a growing world population with healthy diets from sustainable food systems;” the report states.

The report views seafood as a particularly promising source of protein for the future, which is why it’s become a main point of interest for the EAT-Lancet Commission – the entity charged with assessing existing scientific research related to nutrition and food production sustainability; developing global scientific targets for healthy diets and sustainable food production; and integrating these targets into a common framework. Most recently, the commission released a scoping report, “The Role of Seafood in Sustainable and Healthy Diets,” which explores how seafood can contribute to an improved global diet.

The High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy shares a similar interest and investment into the seafood category. Made up of 14 heads of government, the panel’s overarching goal revolves around raising awareness for the mutually-supportive values of economic production and
ocean protection. It hopes to help policymakers strike the right balance between production and protection that will lead to greater productivity, job creation, food security, and regional stability, as well as a healthy, more vibrant ocean. This is reflected in the panel’s “The Future of Food from the Sea” paper, which lays out why seafood is well-positioned to capture future protein market share:

❯ FEED EFFICIENCY: Because of their buoyancy and being cold-blooded, ocean animals convert feed into food for humans very efficiently. Aquaculture systems convert feed much more efficiently than terrestrial production systems and some aquaculture systems do not require feed inputs.

❯ PRODUCTION POTENTIAL: Land-based food production options are very limited. While there are some limitations related to competing sectors and appropriate environmental conditions, there is significant opportunity for growth in aquaculture and limited opportunities for growth in wild-capture fisheries.

❯ NUTRITION: Seafood provides an essential set of nutrients to humans, including vitamins, minerals, long-chain omega-3 fatty acids, and nutrients difficult to find in plant or other animal sources.

❯ CLIMATE CHANGE: Food production is a significant contributor to climate change. Much of the climate impact from terrestrial food production comes from land conversion and deforestation and high greenhouse gas emissions. A recent study by Ray Hilborn indicates the wild-capture production of large pelagic, small pelagic, and whitefish capture fisheries, and the aquaculture production of mollusks and salmon, have greenhouse gas emissions that are lower compared to terrestrial animal production.

❯ ACCESSIBILITY: Low-income and food-deficit countries, as defined by FAO, rely heavily on seafood for their animal protein. Research shows that seafood plays an important role in nutrition provision for low-income countries in Africa and Asia, and increasing production of seafood in these countries can lower prices and increase access to protein and nutrition.

Essential strategies

Industry, too, has seen the development of a number of collective business strategies that are tackling major issues in seafood. The Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative, Sea Pact, SeaBOS, the Sustainable Seafood Coalition, the Global Salmon Initiative, the International Seafood Sustainability Foundation, the Global Dialogue on Seafood Traceability, and the Seafood Task Force are some of the collaborative efforts seafood companies have developed to address pressing sustainability issues in their supply chains. These type of pre-competitive, collaborative business strategies have been an essential element in other industries’ successful efforts to address sustainability challenges, and will be highlighted by Seafood2030.

Lessons from other industries, particularly as they apply to the increasing role governments are playing in institutionalizing or codifying sustainable practices, will factor into Seafood2030’s initial programming.

When Lucas Simons, author of “Changing the Food Game,” spoke to the seafood industry during the 2018 SeaWeb Seafood Summit in Barcelona, Spain, he highlighted the likelihood that companies in seafood will soon be developing a new, more collaborative relationship with regulators – one where businesses are actually asking for more regulation. As unlikely as this scenario sounds, it is playing itself out in the cocoa sector right now. Mars Wrigley, Mondelez, Barry Callebaut, Nestle, and Hershey – believing their brand and customer relationships could be jeopardized – have all pushed for greater regulation around child labor, human rights, and the environment.

The global seafood industry is already seeing a major market disruption with the introduction of plant-based and cellular alternatives, and it is expected that the dynamic nature of the market will continue as consumer preferences, supply-chain requirements, climate change, availability and food security, and international trade change what people eat. Seafood2030 will look at how seafood is faring in this changing marketplace and how it is positioning itself as the protein of the future.

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