

# future of fish

## Innovating around sustainability and profits

An interview with Henry Lovejoy, EcoFish

### Tell us a little bit about how you got started as a seafood entrepreneur.

I've been in the seafood industry for over 20 years. Right out of college I started a lobster exporting company. That gave my wife and me the opportunity to travel around the world and get to know the global seafood trade more intimately. We weren't comfortable with what we learned. It's basically a pure commodity-driven industry. It's all about price and not about quality. I got so disgruntled with it that I thought I should pursue a new career. Then I thought maybe the best thing I could do was use a business model as leverage for change. So I went to Harvard Business School and got an MBA.

### What was the initial impulse that led you to create EcoFish?

When the organics market started to explode in the late '90s, we saw it as an opportunity to build a seafood company in this market. In 1999 we launched EcoFish and pioneered sustainability within the seafood category. Since then we've built a retail brand and are in over 3,000 grocery stores across the country.

### And your retail brand emphasizes the healthfulness of your seafood as opposed to the eco-aspect.

We found it was a much stickier message with consumers. If you package product in a positive light then people will buy it. Negative campaigning doesn't work. And 'eco' either meant nothing or led to wildly different ideas. Why have a brand that only confuses people? From a purely consumer penetration perspective, we needed to have a consistent label, and health is what worked. We've launched some heat-and-eat frozen products and are now in some of the mainstream supermarkets as opposed to just high-end health food stores.

### Has this rebranding helped business?

We've got a long ways to go, but we're doing well. Sales are up 45% this year over last. Our goal is to grow this methodically and carefully and see this get as big as it can be.



DR. HENRY LOVEJOY

*Henry Lovejoy is the president and founder of EcoFish Inc., the only seafood distributor in the world that sells only environmentally sustainable seafood. Along with his wife Lisa, they have striven to set a good example for corporate America by aiming for the triple bottom line—operate a profitable business that is also socially and environmentally responsible. Learn more about the Lovejoy story and EcoFish at [www.ecofish.com](http://www.ecofish.com)*

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## **The seafood supply chain is fairly complex and you have very specific sustainability criteria for the fish you buy.**

### **How do you source your product?**

It's incredibly complex. I argue that seafood is the most complex food category on the planet. Because of its complexities, all of our items are sourced differently. Our model is to get as close to the fishermen as possible. Sometimes it means buying from the dock, other times it's from a fishing co-op, and other times it's from a fishing company.

We're always looking for new sources, but we have a business model where we're the most regulated seafood company on the planet. But we chose to do it this way. And it's really complicated. The marine conservation community approves every product we sell. This makes sourcing really complicated. It took us three years to find a shrimp farm that our advisory board would approve.

### **What is keeping the sustainable seafood market from growing more quickly?**

There are still a lot of unsustainable fisheries out there. If they're presented with a sustainability model that's not economically viable, they're not going to be interested in it. What many in the industry don't understand is that sustainable isn't just a label. It's the future.

On supply side, it's much more difficult. There are plenty of seafood companies that make between \$500 million and \$1 billion in profits. If you apply the MSC standard to their species list, there might be 6 that make the grade. It's going to be hard for a company like that to adapt and be financially sustainable because they'd have to throw 95% of their fish away. It's just a dinosaur industry. It would take a long time.

As for change on the water, as long as the economics work out to chase a certain fish, there will be people out there chasing it. It gets really hard when you move outside international boundaries. It's a monumental challenge.

### **What do you see as the biggest threat to the sustainability movement?**

The biggest threat to the sustainable seafood movement is greenwashing. A lot of companies are pretending to be sustainable but they really aren't. We were vocal from the beginning that should we happen to be successful with this, the watch out; the industry will jump on board and do as little as they can to get sustainability credit.

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“What many in the industry don't understand is that sustainable isn't just a label. It's the future. You can do all you can to fish it out, and then it's gone. I think they're starting to understand that their company will disappear to if they run out of product.”