



Aquarium
Conservation
Partnership



Sourcing Sustainable Seafood Feed for Animals in Our Care

Business Commitment Guidance Document

www.aquariumconservation.org

Table of Contents

Introduction	6
Purpose	7 - 9
About the Sourcing Seafood Sustainable Seafood Feed	10 - 12
How to Use This Guidance Document	13
Background	14 - 15
What is Sustainable Seafood?	16 - 19
Illegal, Unreported, or Unregulated Fisheries (IUU)	20 - 22

Sustainable Seafood Feed Commitment

Commitment Language 24

Process and Timeline for
Making Commitment 24

2024 FishChoice Assessment 25 - 26

Results 28 - 29

Analysis 30 - 31

Evaluation Results 32

Key Takeaways 33

Challenges 33

Recommendations 34

Recommendations to Adopt the Commitment	35 - 36
---	---------

Sustainable Alternatives	36 - 37
--------------------------	---------

Animal Welfare & Nutrition	38 - 40
----------------------------	---------

What to Include in Sourcing Policies	41 - 42
--------------------------------------	---------

Making the Business Case for Sourcing Sustainable Seafood Feed	43 - 48
--	---------

Communicating with Audiences	49 - 50
------------------------------	---------

Resources	51 - 52
-----------	---------

Appendix A - Work Group Members	53 - 55
---------------------------------	---------

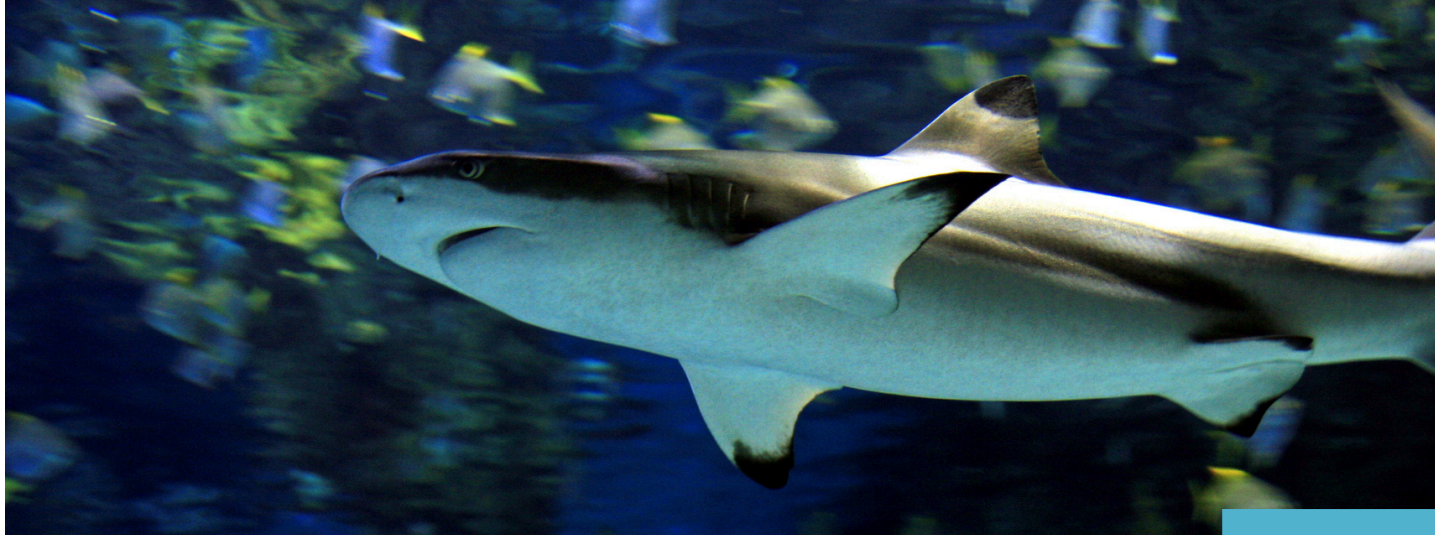
Appendix B - Process and Timeline for Making the Commitment 56 - 58

Contacts 59

The purpose of this document is to provide background information, resources, and recommendations to support the joint ACP and SAFE Shark and Ray Sustainable Seafood Feed Commitment, and to assist participating institutions in understanding, communicating, and achieving each component of the commitment.

An underwater scene featuring a large, light-colored shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, there is a vibrant orange sea anemone with many tentacles, situated on a dark, textured coral reef. A small, striped fish is visible near the base of the anemone. The overall lighting is dim, creating a deep blue atmosphere.

Introduction



Purpose

The **Sourcing Sustainable Seafood for Animals in Our Care** project is a collaborative initiative between the Aquarium Conservation Partnership (ACP) and AZA SAFE Shark and Ray. Together, we aim to accelerate the transition to sustainable seafood alternatives by advancing the identification and adoption of nutritionally sound, practical feed solutions that support both the health and wellbeing of the animals in our care and the health of our oceans.

Through close collaboration with ACP and AZA members, AZA Nutrition Advisory Group, suppliers, seafood vendors, Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, FishChoice, and retail and catering partners, this project seeks to strengthen supply chains, promote sustainable fisheries, and empower AZA-accredited institutions to adopt responsibly sourced seafood feeds—highlighting the critical connection between sustainable seafood sourcing and ecosystem and wildlife conservation.

Animal feed is a key element of the sustainable purchasing journey for aquariums and zoos. Making sustainable purchasing decisions for animal feed requires balancing several key factors—including the environmental and social impact of the feed source, its nutritional value, and location-specific considerations.

Seafood used for aquatic animal feed presents even greater sustainability challenges. Overfishing, ineffective resource management, a changing climate, and global consumption patterns have all contributed to declining wild fish populations. AZA-accredited institutions procure an estimated 17 million pounds of seafood annually for animal diets. However, data from an assessment of 54 aquariums and zoos indicates that **55% of species** and **25% of the total volume** of seafood fed to animals at these institutions **have an unknown sustainability status**. These gaps highlight the urgent need for improved transparency and sustainability assessments within seafood supply chains.

Seafood sustains billions of people worldwide, providing essential nutrition and livelihoods for coastal communities. As global demand continues to rise, adopting sustainable fishing and aquaculture practices is vital to protect the ocean, its ecosystems, and its wildlife. Overfishing and bycatch remain among the greatest threats to aquatic species, particularly to sharks and rays—but aquariums and zoos have a unique opportunity to help drive change.



With thousands of animals on-site, AZA institutions collectively purchase several tons of seafood each year. These volumes make thoughtful, informed choices about animal diets critically important. Yet, many of the seafood species used in animal care often lack established sustainability ratings or assessments. As trusted stewards of the ocean and its wildlife, we must rigorously evaluate the seafood we source to ensure its long-term sustainability—for the animals in aquariums and zoos and their wild counterparts for generations to come.

As major seafood purchasers, aquariums and zoos have the collective power to influence markets and drive the shift toward more sustainable fishing practices. By leveraging that influence, we aim to accelerate the transition to sustainable seafood alternatives through the identification and adoption of nutritionally sound, practical feed solutions that support both the health and wellbeing of the animals in our care and the health of our oceans.

By committing to sustainable seafood practices in our institutions and inspiring our audiences to do the same, we can drive meaningful change. When AZA-accredited facilities collectively choose to purchase seafood from responsibly managed fisheries, we will send a clear signal to suppliers to prioritize sustainability. This collective action will support fisheries and aquaculture that protect ocean ecosystems and wildlife through science-based catch limits, bycatch reduction measures, and habitat conservation —ensuring healthier oceans for the future.

The goal of this project is to feed sustainable seafood, or sustainable alternatives to seafood, to the animals in our care - while accounting for their various needs as well as individual preferences.



About the Sourcing Sustainable Seafood Project

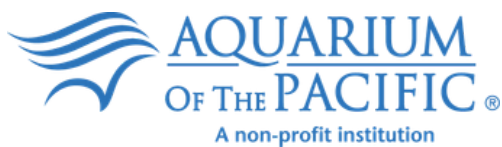
*This project originated from a **2019 survey** conducted by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program. Recognizing the strong alignment with the conservation goals of both the Aquarium Conservation Partnership (ACP) and AZA SAFE Shark and Ray, the two organizations joined forces in 2022 to develop and advance this collaborative initiative with the following goals:*



1. Assess and evaluate the sustainability of seafood products that SAFE and ACP members are currently sourcing.
2. Use the results to pilot a joint business commitment to identify alternatives and source more sustainable seafood feed.
3. Monitor and evaluate the impact and success of pilot facilities that make this commitment.
4. Communicate efforts to our audiences to increase consumer demand for sustainable seafood
5. Make recommendations for a pathway to include the broader AZA community.
6. Accelerate market change toward ocean-friendly alternatives.

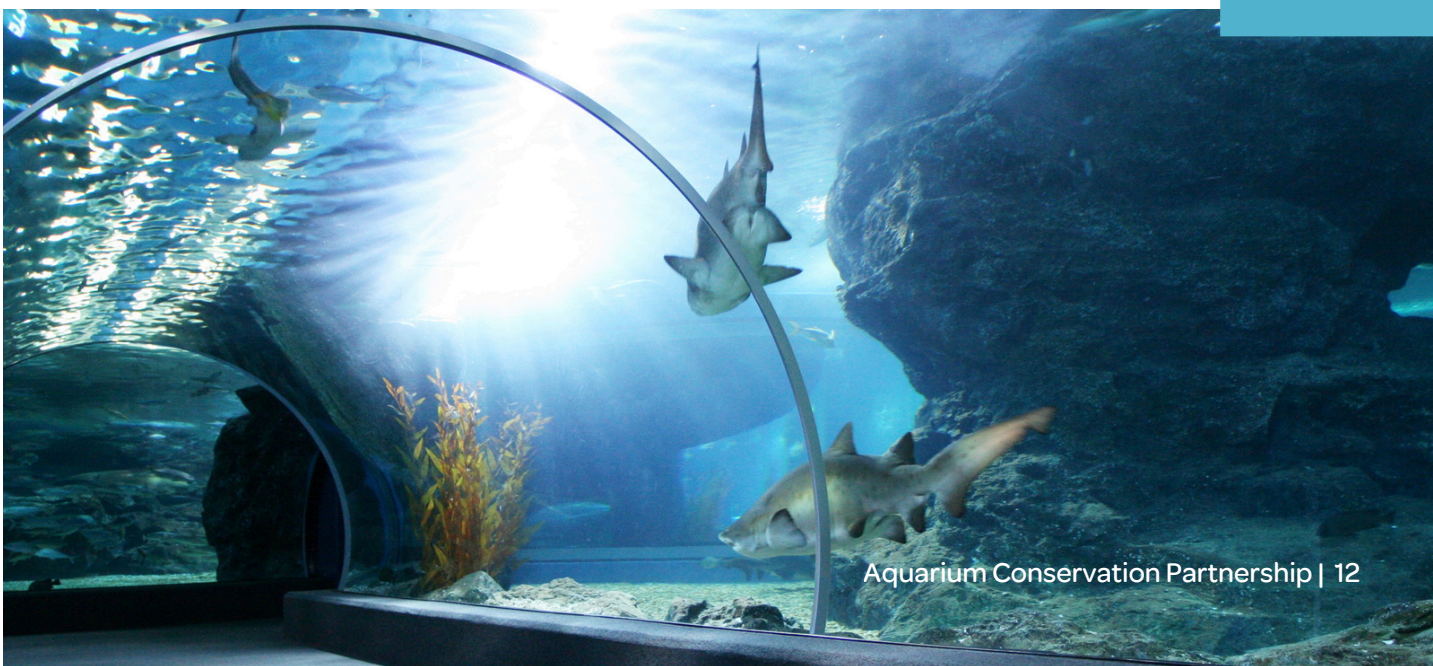
Activities in this Project

11 institutions formed a Sustainable Seafood Feed Work Group to guide the project with representatives from institutions listed below and in consultation with the AZA Nutritional Advisory Group (NAG), Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Program, suppliers, seafood vendors, retail, and catering partners to consider all the factors involved in seafood feed purchases including environmental sustainability, social responsibility, nutritional value, pricing, availability, and reliability.



- With support from the AZA Conservation Grants Fund, identified FishChoice’s “My Assessment” tool which enabled participating partners to upload purchasing data for one year’s worth of seafood products purchased and used as feed in their institution.
- Conducted [an assessment](#) and analyzed the sustainability of seafood feed across 54 AZA-accredited institutions.
- Developed a [joint sustainable seafood feed commitment](#) to pilot with Work Group members.
- Produced an audit of sourcing policy and sustainability criteria.
- Conducted an [evaluation](#) of the pilot.
- Drafted a [Sourcing Sustainable Feed for Animals in Our Care 2024 Project Report](#).

The pilot wrapped up in **December 2025** with the Work Group’s recommendation to open up the commitment more broadly to all ACP members and AZA SAFE Shark and Ray partners to join in order to strengthen our collective impact and ensure that diverse perspectives are represented. By welcoming additional ACP and SAFE Shark and Ray member zoos and aquariums to make this commitment, we aim to broaden member input, foster collaboration across a wider community, and create a more unified voice in advancing sustainable feed practices. This expansion will allow us to share knowledge, address challenges collectively, and develop solutions that reflect the needs and experiences of a larger network, ultimately supporting the long-term success of sustainable seafood sourcing within the AZA community.





How to Use This Guidance Document

The **Sustainable Seafood Feed Business Commitment Guide** is designed to help institutions who adopt the commitment to make informed seafood sourcing decisions that support both their conservation and sustainability goals, as well as the priorities of the Aquarium Conservation Partnership (ACP) and the SAFE Shark and Ray program.

This guide is intended for all employees involved in seafood purchasing—whether directly making purchases, contributing to sourcing decisions, or setting, measuring, and tracking sustainability goals and priorities.

As a living document, the guide will be regularly updated to provide institutions with the most relevant and current resources. Its contents will evolve over time to reflect new information, emerging best practices, and advancements in sustainable seafood sourcing.

An underwater scene featuring a large, light-colored shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, there is a vibrant orange sea anemone with many tentacles, situated on a dark, textured rock formation. A small, striped fish is visible near the base of the anemone. The overall lighting is dim, creating a deep blue atmosphere.

Background

Background

For purposes of this commitment, sustainable seafood is defined as:

- Seafood rated green or yellow by Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, OR
- Certified against a [Global Sustainable Seafood Sustainability Initiative \(GSSI\)-benchmarked standard](#), OR
- In improvement and sourced from a credible Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) or Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP), or in an assessment to be certified.

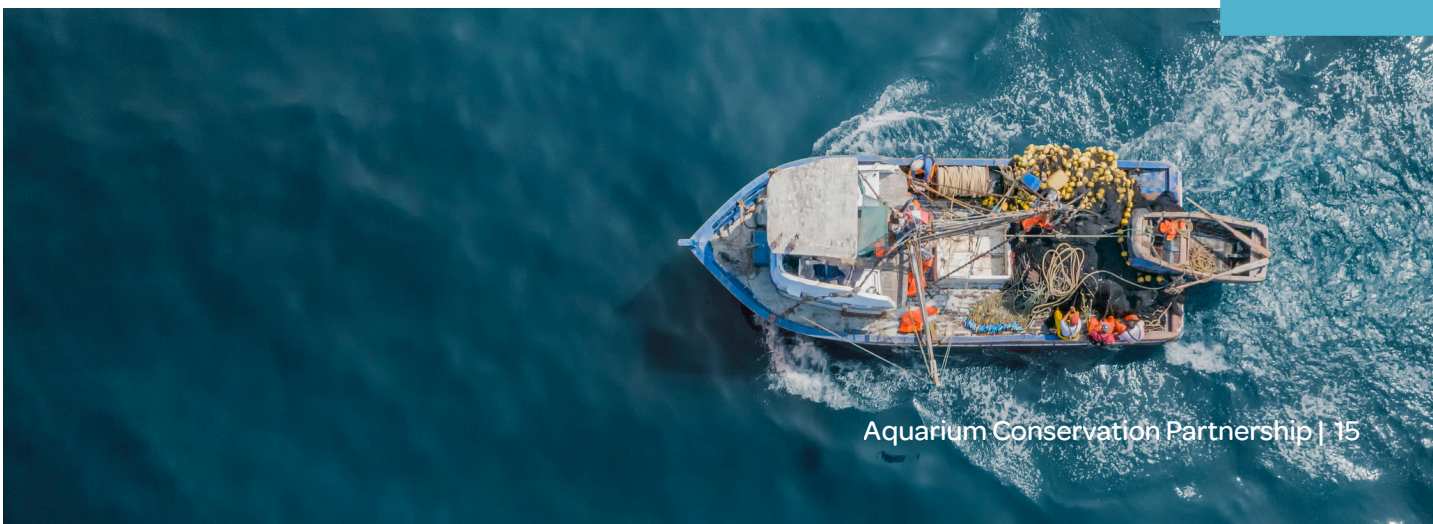


**Monterey Bay Aquarium
Seafood Watch**



An additional component of the commitment is for institutions to not knowingly purchase seafood from illegal, unreported, or unregulated (IUU) sources or from any facilities or fisheries with labor concerns.

Each of these commitment elements is described on the next page.



What is Sustainable Seafood

Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch Ratings

According to the [Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program](#), sustainable seafood refers to seafood that comes from fisheries or aquaculture operations that can maintain or increase production over time without compromising the structure, function, or health of the ecosystems from which it is sourced. In practice, this means seafood that is caught or farmed using methods that minimize environmental impacts, avoid overfishing, and protect habitats and other marine wildlife. Sustainable seafood also depends on effective management and responsible practices that allow fish populations and ocean ecosystems to remain productive for the long term while continuing to provide food and livelihoods for communities that depend on them.

Seafood rated green, yellow, or red by the Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program reflects how responsibly a species is caught or farmed based on [environmental criteria](#). Best Choices (Green) are seafood options that come from well-managed fisheries or responsibly operated aquaculture farms with minimal impacts on ocean ecosystems. Good Alternatives (Yellow) are species that may have some environmental concerns but are still considered better options compared to less sustainable alternatives. Avoid (Red) represents seafood that is caught or farmed in ways that can cause significant harm to ocean ecosystems, such as overfishing, high bycatch, habitat damage, or poor aquaculture practices. These ratings help consumers and institutional buyers make informed decisions that support more sustainable seafood production and healthier marine environments.

Best Choice

Buy first. Green-rated seafood is well managed and caught or farmed in an environmentally responsible manner. It poses a low environmental risk.

Good Alternative

Buy if a green-rated option is not available. This seafood poses a moderate environmental risk.

Avoid

Take a pass on this red-rated seafood for now because it poses a high risk to the environment.

Global Sustainable Seafood Sustainability Initiative (GSSI)-Benchmarked Standard

The [Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative \(GSSI\)](#) provides a benchmarking framework that evaluates seafood certification schemes against internationally recognized guidelines for responsible fisheries and aquaculture, primarily those established by the [Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations \(FAO\)](#). A GSSI-benchmarked standard is therefore a certification program that has been independently assessed and found to meet these internationally agreed sustainability criteria, helping buyers and stakeholders identify credible seafood certification systems, and is therefore the standard used in the sustainable seafood commitment.

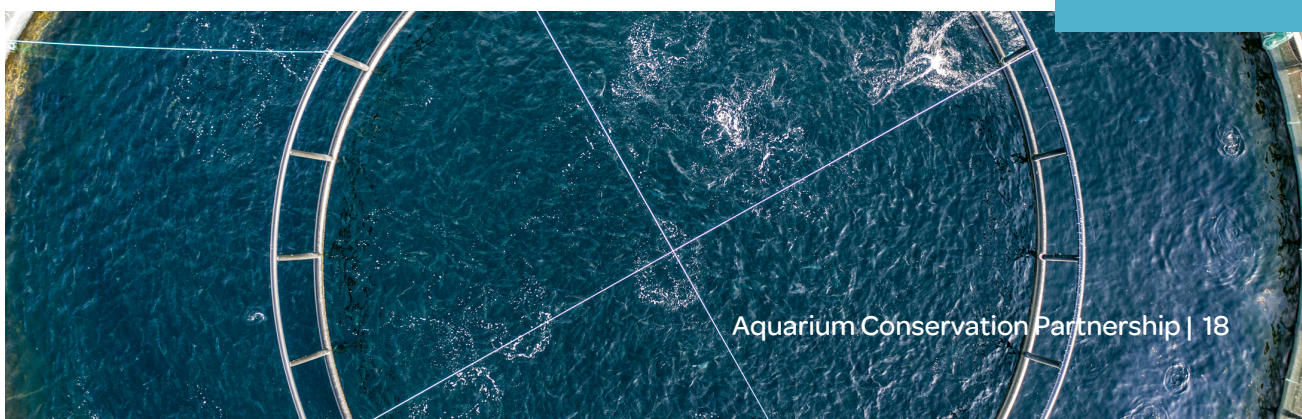


Two major aquaculture certifications recognized through this benchmarking process are the [Aquaculture Stewardship Council \(ASC\)](#) and [Best Aquaculture Practices \(BAP\)](#) program of the [Global Seafood Alliance](#). The ASC is a global certification and labeling program focused on environmentally responsible and socially responsible aquaculture, with standards that address impacts such as water quality, habitat protection, feed sourcing, and labor conditions. The BAP is a comprehensive certification program that evaluates environmental responsibility, animal health and welfare, food safety, and social accountability across multiple stages of the aquaculture production chain, including hatcheries, farms, feed mills, and processing plants. Together, these certifications help ensure farmed seafood is produced in ways that reduce environmental impacts, promote responsible management, and support transparency in global seafood supply chains.

Future plans for this project include working to strengthen the sustainable seafood commitment by incorporating emerging priorities such as climate impacts and local sourcing into the guidance and purchasing frameworks. Through updates to the commitment and through [ACP's Sustainable Purchasing Guide](#), we are exploring how institutions can consider the carbon footprint of seafood production and transportation, support climate-resilient fisheries and aquaculture practices, and prioritize locally and regionally sourced seafood where appropriate. By integrating these considerations alongside established sustainability criteria—such as responsible fishery management and credible certification—we aim to help aquariums and other institutional buyers make purchasing decisions that not only protect ocean ecosystems but also reduce climate impacts and support local fishing communities and food systems.

Fishery Improvement Projects (FIP) and Aquaculture Improvement Projects (AIP)

A Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) is a multi-stakeholder effort designed to improve the environmental performance and management of a fishery so that it can move toward internationally recognized standards for sustainability. FIPs typically involve collaboration among fishers, seafood buyers, processors, nonprofits, scientists, and governments to address key environmental challenges such as overfishing, bycatch, habitat impacts, and gaps in fishery management. Participants work through a structured improvement plan that includes specific actions, timelines, and measurable milestones. By implementing fishery management reforms, strengthening data collection, and improving fishing practices, FIPs aim to help fisheries progress toward meeting credible sustainability benchmarks and, in many cases, eventually qualify for certification programs.





Similarly, an Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP) is a structured, collaborative process aimed at improving the environmental and social performance of aquaculture operations. AIPs bring together producers, buyers, nonprofits, and technical experts to address challenges such as water quality impacts, disease management, responsible feed sourcing, habitat protection, and labor conditions. Like FIPs, AIPs establish measurable goals and improvement plans that guide producers toward more responsible practices and alignment with internationally recognized standards for sustainable aquaculture.

Both FIPs and AIPs play an important role in global seafood supply chains by creating pathways for fisheries and farms that are not yet fully sustainable to make measurable progress and demonstrate transparency and accountability along the way.

Illegal, Unreported, or Unregulated (IUU) Fisheries

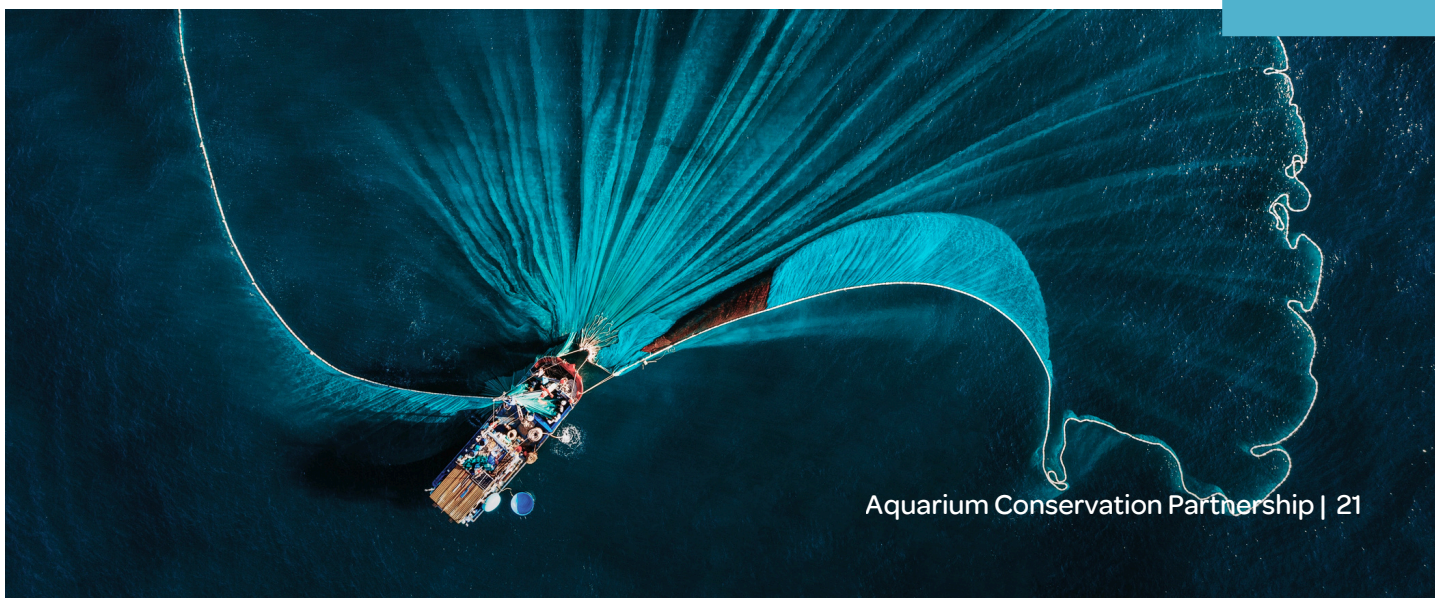
Illegal, Unreported, or Unregulated (IUU) fishing refers to fishing activities that violate national laws, international regulations, or established fishery management measures. The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) defines the three components as:

- **Illegal Fishing:** Activities conducted by national or foreign vessels in waters under the jurisdiction of a State without permission, or in violation of its laws and regulations.
- **Unreported Fishing:** Fishing that has not been reported or has been misreported to relevant authorities, violating national laws or international procedures.
- **Unregulated Fishing:** Fishing that occurs in areas or for fish stocks where there are no applicable conservation or management measures, or by vessels without nationality, or flying the flag of a country not party to relevant organizations

Together, IUU fishing undermines sustainable fisheries management, threatens marine ecosystems, creates unfair competition for law-abiding fishers, and can be associated with broader governance and labor concerns in global seafood supply chains.

A number of policy, regulatory, and international governance frameworks exist to combat Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing at both the national and global levels. These frameworks focus on improving traceability, strengthening enforcement, regulating vessel activity, and preventing illegally caught seafood from entering markets.

In the United States, several key laws and programs address IUU fishing and seafood fraud. The [Magnuson-Stevens Fishery Conservation and Management Act](#) is the primary law governing marine fisheries management in U.S. federal waters and includes provisions to identify and take action against nations engaged in IUU fishing that impacts U.S. fisheries. The [Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing Enforcement Act](#) implements international obligations under the Port State Measures Agreement and strengthens enforcement against vessels engaged in illegal fishing. The [NOAA Seafood Import Monitoring Program \(SIMP\)](#) requires importers of certain high-risk seafood species to provide traceability information documenting where and how the seafood was harvested, helping prevent IUU products from entering the U.S. market. Additionally, the [High Seas Driftnet Fishing Moratorium Protection Act](#) authorizes the United States to identify and potentially sanction nations whose vessels engage in IUU fishing or practices that undermine international conservation measures.



Labor Concerns

Human rights and labor concerns are increasingly recognized as important considerations in seafood supply chains, particularly in capture fisheries where work often occurs in remote environments with limited oversight. Documented risks in some fisheries include forced labor, human trafficking, child labor, wage withholding, excessive working hours, physical abuse, and unsafe working conditions. Migrant workers may be especially vulnerable due to language barriers, limited legal protections, or the confiscation of identity documents, and extended time at sea can further limit workers' ability to report abuses or access assistance.

To help address these risks, initiatives such as the [Fishery Progress Human Rights and Social Responsibility Policy](#) provide guidance for Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs) to assess and mitigate potential human rights and labor abuses associated with fishing activities. The policy encourages fisheries participating in improvement projects to publicly commit to social responsibility, evaluate whether their fisheries operate in regions with elevated risks of labor abuses, and develop measures to identify and reduce those risks. By promoting transparency and due diligence, these frameworks aim to support more responsible seafood supply chains that consider both environmental sustainability and the protection of workers' rights.

The Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch program developed the [Seafood Social Risk Tool](#), which assesses the likelihood that forced labor, human trafficking, or child labor may occur in specific fisheries or aquaculture sectors. The tool compiles publicly available information from governments, NGOs, and other credible sources to help seafood buyers and businesses identify areas of elevated social risk and conduct due diligence within their supply chains. Through these efforts, Seafood Watch aims to encourage greater transparency and accountability for labor conditions in the seafood industry.

An underwater scene featuring a large shark swimming in the background and a vibrant coral reef in the foreground. The text "Sustainable Seafood Feed Commitment" is overlaid on the image.

Sustainable Seafood Feed Commitment

The Sustainable Feed Work Group developed the following commitment over the course of a year of collaborative discussions, informed by ACP members and AZA-accredited facilities' firsthand experiences in sourcing sustainable seafood. This voluntary commitment is designed to be flexible for individual institutions and supported by both the Aquarium Conservation Partnership (ACP) and the SAFE Shark and Ray program. See Appendix B for the process and timeline for making the commitment in 2026.

Commitment to Source Sustainable Seafood Feed for Animals in Our Care

[Your institution's name] goal is to feed sustainable seafood, or sustainable alternatives to seafood, to the animals in our care - while accounting for their various needs as well as individual preferences. To meet this goal, [your institution's name] commits to:

- Source sustainable seafood for the top 10 assessed seafood species we collectively purchase by volume as identified in this project.
- Source sustainable seafood or sustainable alternatives, including those in improvement and sourced from a credible Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) or Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP), or in assessment to be certified, for all "avoid rated" seafood species that we collectively purchase as defined by Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch.
- Not knowingly purchase seafood from illegal, unreported, or unregulated (IUU) sources or from any facilities or fisheries with labor concerns.

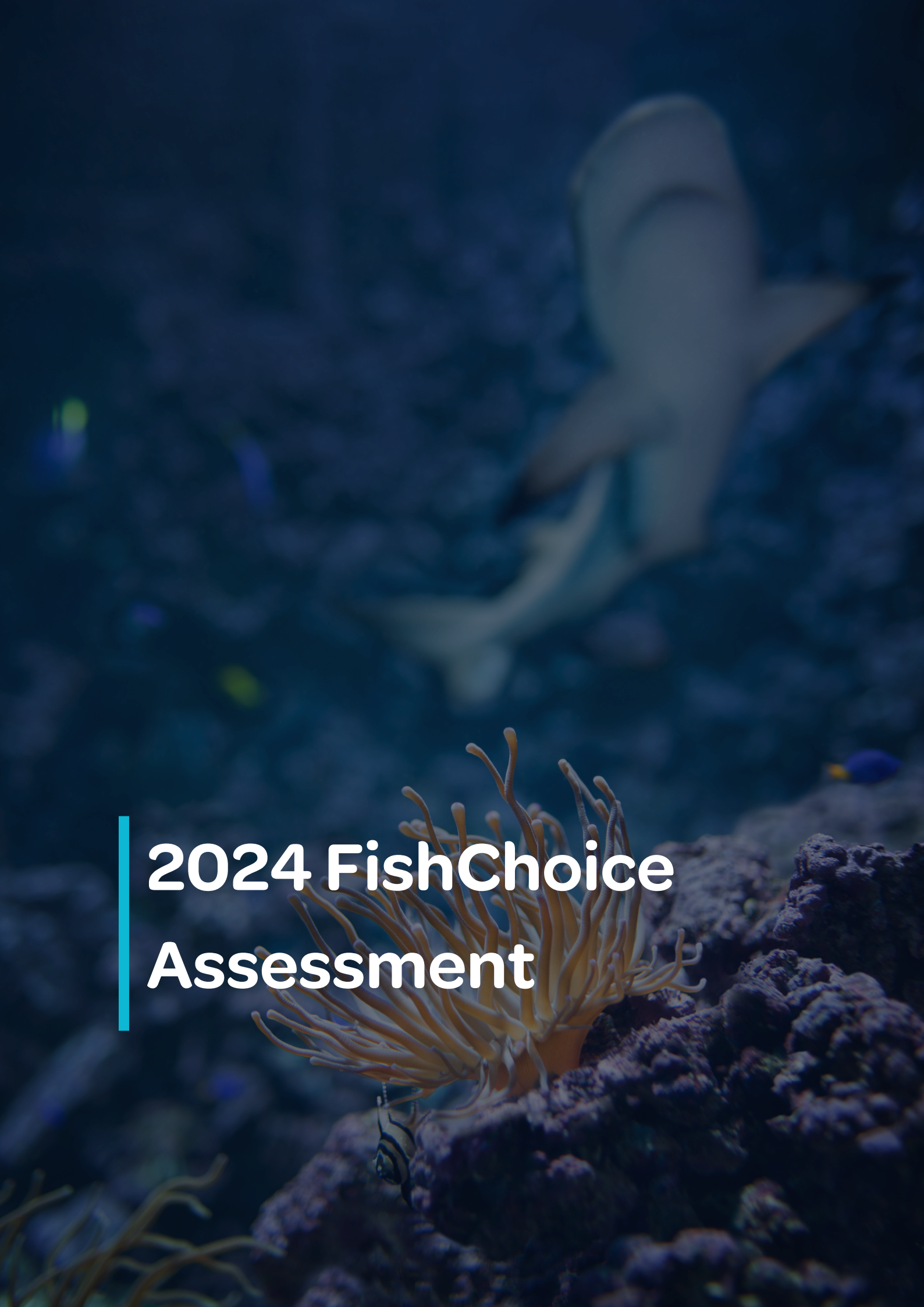
Individual institutions will determine their own timeline to meet the commitment.

For purposes of this commitment, sustainable seafood is defined as:

- Seafood rated green or yellow by Monterey Bay Aquarium Seafood Watch, OR
- Certified against a [Global Sustainable Seafood Sustainability Initiative \(GSSI\)-benchmarked standard](#), OR
- In improvement and sourced from a credible Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) or Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP), or in assessment to be certified.

To achieve this commitment, we will work together and with partners to:

- State the timeline to meet the commitment by the end of year 1 and report on progress annually.
- Conduct biannual assessments of the seafood we purchase to measure and report on progress.
- Leverage our collective scale, influence, and expertise to advance sustainable seafood.
- Advocate for the top 10 unassessed seafood species we collectively source by volume to be rated or certified.
- Identify and assess sustainable alternatives that meet the needs of animals in our care.
- Consider the sustainability of feed in collection planning processes.
- Share this commitment and report on our progress publicly.

An underwater scene featuring a large, white shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, a clownfish is visible near a vibrant orange anemone. The background is filled with various small, colorful fish swimming in the blue water.

2024 FishChoice Assessment

2024 FishChoice Assessment

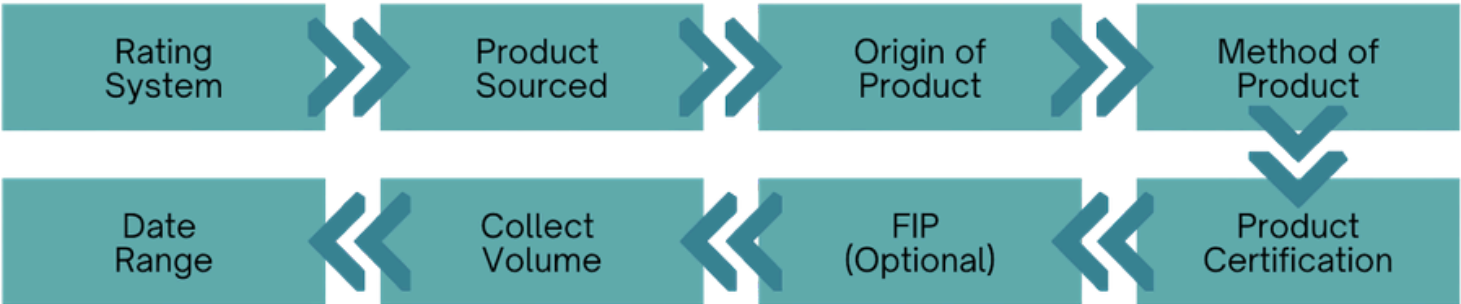
Assessing the sustainability of seafood is a crucial first step for this project because it establishes a clear understanding of current sourcing practices, identifies areas for improvement, and provides a baseline from which institutions can set measurable goals and track progress toward more responsible and environmentally conscious procurement.

Method

For the initial assessment of the pilot project, we used FishChoice’s My Assessment Tool to evaluate the sustainability of seafood sourcing across 54 accredited AZA institutions including ACP members and AZA SAFE Shark and Ray partners. The tool enabled participants to upload one full year of purchasing data for seafood products used as animal feed in their zoos and aquariums, allowing us to systematically assess current sourcing practices and identify sustainability strengths and gaps across institutions.



The ‘My Assessment Tool’ followed this model of data collection
(for an in-depth guide, please see [here](#)):



The key pieces of information gathered via FishChoice's 'My Assessment' tool was:

- The rating system (for this project we used Seafood Watch)
- The species scientific name
- The geographical origin of the product
- The fishing or farming method of the product
- If the product is certified (Alaska RFM, ASC, BAP, GLOBALG.A.P., GULF RFM, MSC)
- If the product comes from a FIP listed on FisheryProgress.org, and the name of the FIP
- The volume
- The date range during which the product was ordered

Disclaimer: The 'My Assessment Tool' is no longer active.

Results: Sustainability Breakdown by Volume

This next section provides a breakdown of sustainability by volume, highlighting the top-rated products of items logged utilizing the Fishchoice 'My Assessment Tool'. It is important to note a disclaimer regarding potentially repeated items, which may reflect differences in product sources rather than duplications. Each product's source is identified, providing context for the sustainability assessment. In this pilot, the primary focus is on unrated products, emphasizing the need to engage with tools like [Seafood Watch](#) as well as with vendors to drive improvements and influence positive change in sourcing practices.

¹ [Fishchoice](#) is an online tool that powers progress on sustainable seafood. It provides accessible, comprehensible, and trustworthy information through sustainability ratings, certifications, and FIP sourcing.

Assessment Results

Data as of 09/2024

Top-ten reported Aquarium feeds (by volume)

1. Capelin
2. Pacific Herring
3. Atlantic Herring
4. Rainbow Smelt
5. Northern Shortfin Squid
6. Atlantic Surf Clams
7. California Market Squid
8. White Shrimp
9. Antarctic Krill
10. Pacific Mackerel

Seafood Watch Sustainability Ratings of Aquarium feeds (by volume)

Best Choice

Buy first. Green-rated seafood is well managed and caught or farmed in an environmentally responsible manner. It poses a low environmental risk.

Good Alternative

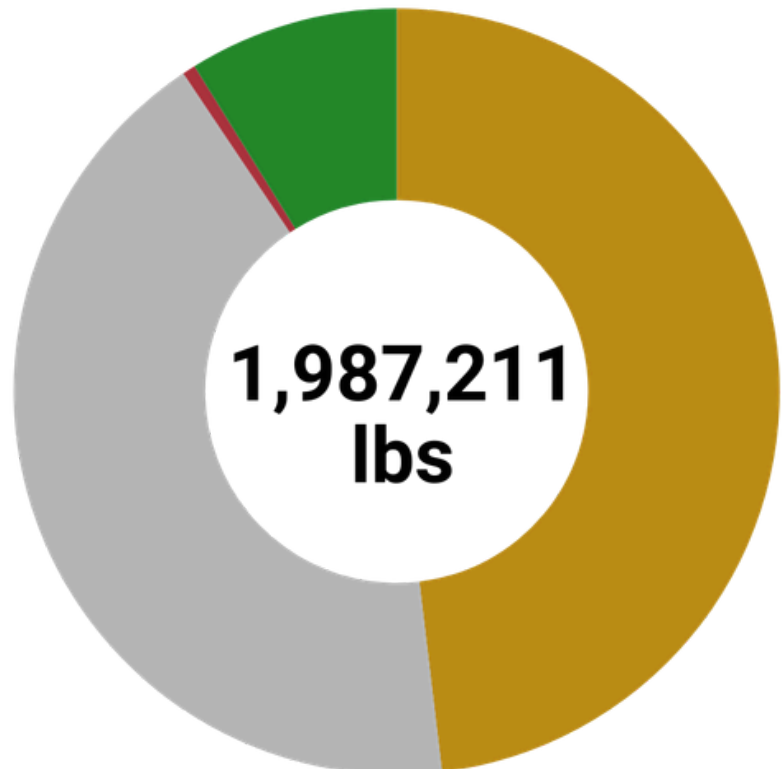
Buy if a green-rated option is not available. This seafood poses a moderate environmental risk.

Avoid

Take a pass on this red-rated seafood for now because it poses a high risk to the environment. It's overfished, lacks strong management or is caught or farmed in ways that harm other marine life or the environment.

Unrated

These products have not been assessed by Seafood Watch for sustainability criteria. Detailed information about annual protocols for updating assessments can be found [here](#).



Assessment Results

Data as of 09/2024

Top Aquarium feeds according to Seafood Watch Ratings

Rated Best Choice

Top Five Products

1. California Market Squid
2. Atlantic Herring*
3. Rainbow Trout
4. White Shrimp
5. Atlantic Salmon

Rated Good Alternative

Top Five Products

1. Capelin*
2. Pacific Herring
3. Rainbow Smelt*
4. White Shrimp
5. Antarctic Krill

Rated Avoid

Top Five Products

1. Jonah Crab
2. Blue Crab
3. Mahi-Mahi
4. Atlantic Mackerel
5. Brown Shrimp

Unrated

Top Five Products

1. Atlantic Herring
2. Capelin
3. Pacific Herring
4. Pacific Mackerel
5. Summer Flounder*

*Individual species reported above vary by catch methods and locations. *As of this report in Q1 2025, some ratings have changed based on updated assessments. Current recommendations can be found on the following pages.*



Analysis

An analysis of seafood sourcing across ACP member institutions and SAFE Shark and Ray program partners reveals key insights into the sustainability of the seafood used for animal feed. More than half of the seafood used is unrated by Seafood Watch, highlighting a significant gap in sustainability information. Of the seafood that is rated, only 5% falls into the “Avoid” category, indicating that while most sourced products are not explicitly harmful, the lack of ratings limits the ability to fully evaluate sustainability.

It is important to note that most seafood feed assessed for sustainability is evaluated with human consumption in mind, yet the majority of animals in aquariums and zoos consume forage fish—species that are not commonly eaten by humans in Western countries. Because sustainability ratings primarily focus on human consumption, they do not always account for the specific nutritional needs or welfare considerations of animals in our pilot aquariums. This can reduce the availability of sustainability assessments for certain species or production methods used in animal feed and may influence the overall sustainability rating of aquaculture products.

Despite these limitations, efforts to improve seafood assessments and promote sustainable practices are ongoing across multiple sectors of the industry. One of the next steps for this project is to collaborate with Seafood Watch to assess the most commonly fed unrated species. While this represents a significant undertaking due to the volume and variety of species used in animal feed, it is a critical step toward expanding sustainability evaluations and enabling more informed, responsible sourcing decisions.

Understanding Impacts of Sourcing Seafood

This analysis reinforced that sustainable seafood sourcing extends beyond identifying alternative products for animal feed. It also requires consideration of the broader social responsibilities associated with seafood supply chains. At the time of the assessment, FishChoice did not incorporate social factors—such as labor practices or carbon footprint—into its evaluation framework, representing a key limitation of the tool. An initial effort was made to capture some of these considerations through a supplemental Google Form; however, further reflection highlighted that assessing social factors is a complex undertaking that cannot be adequately addressed through a simple or ad hoc data collection method. Meaningful evaluation of social responsibility in seafood sourcing will require more robust, intentional approaches and warrants further examination moving forward.

Lessons Learned and Moving Forward

Moving forward, it is clear that collaboration is essential to strengthening seafood sourcing tools and practices. Lessons learned from the pilot highlighted limitations in FishChoice, including gaps in assessing social responsibility and nutritional considerations. Developing a more robust framework will require working closely with multiple stakeholders, including vendors, to ensure the tool captures relevant sustainability criteria while also supporting nutritionally appropriate feed for animals. Recognizing that sustainable sourcing does not automatically equate to nutritionally adequate feed is critical, and future efforts should prioritize both ecological and animal health considerations in tandem.



An underwater scene featuring a large, white shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, there is a vibrant orange sea anemone with long, flowing tentacles, situated on a dark, rocky coral reef. A small, striped fish is visible near the base of the anemone. The overall lighting is dim, creating a deep blue atmosphere.

Evaluation Results

Pilot Evaluation Results

In October 2025, [Inform Evaluation & Research](#) conducted an [evaluation](#) of the pilot commitment, focused on understanding successes and barriers in adopting sustainable feed practices at these partner organizations, as well as what messaging may be important to accompany these efforts. The results of the pilot phase of the project will inform implementation with a broader scope of partners in subsequent years.

The following questions guided the evaluation of the pilot project:

1. **What contributes to the successful adoption of sustainable feed practices at aquariums?**
2. **What are the barriers to adopting sustainable feed practices?**
3. **What guest interpretation is being adopted at aquariums around sustainable feed practices?**



Findings of the evaluation include:

Finding #1: Although seafood sustainability is often considered in purchasing decisions, most ACP and AZA institutions lack formal processes to guide that consideration.

Finding #2: Organizations view sustainable feed as important, but implementation remains challenging.

Finding #3: Common barriers included finding up-to-date information, balancing sustainability and nutritional needs, and the time required to stay informed.

Finding #4: Institutions want help identifying and engaging vendors, plus decision-making tools (e.g., a decision tree) to guide sustainable feed sourcing.

Finding #5: Most organizations are still developing guest-facing messaging about sustainable feed.

Based on the findings, Inform developed the following recommendations. Our hope is that this guidance document, support from ACP and AZA SAFE Shark and Rays, commitment meetings, and subsequent resources will help with these recommendations.

Recommendations:

Recommendation #1: Offer a checklist of the information institutions should request from vendors, and train vendors on the data AZA institutions require.

Recommendation #2: Continue providing a forum for purchasers to discuss problems and solutions.

Recommendation #3: Continue nutritional assessments and share practical guidance on incorporating diverse feed into animal diets.

Recommendation #4: Offer guidance on crafting messaging for sustainable feed.



An underwater scene featuring a large shark swimming in the background and a vibrant orange sea anemone in the foreground. The background is dark blue, and the foreground shows purple coral and a small striped fish near the anemone.

Recommendations to Adopt the Commitment

Recommendations

The recommendations in this section hope to address many of the challenges that participating institutions identified to meet the goal to “feed sustainable seafood, or sustainable alternatives to seafood, to the animals in our care - while accounting for their various needs as well as individual preferences”.

Sustainable Alternatives

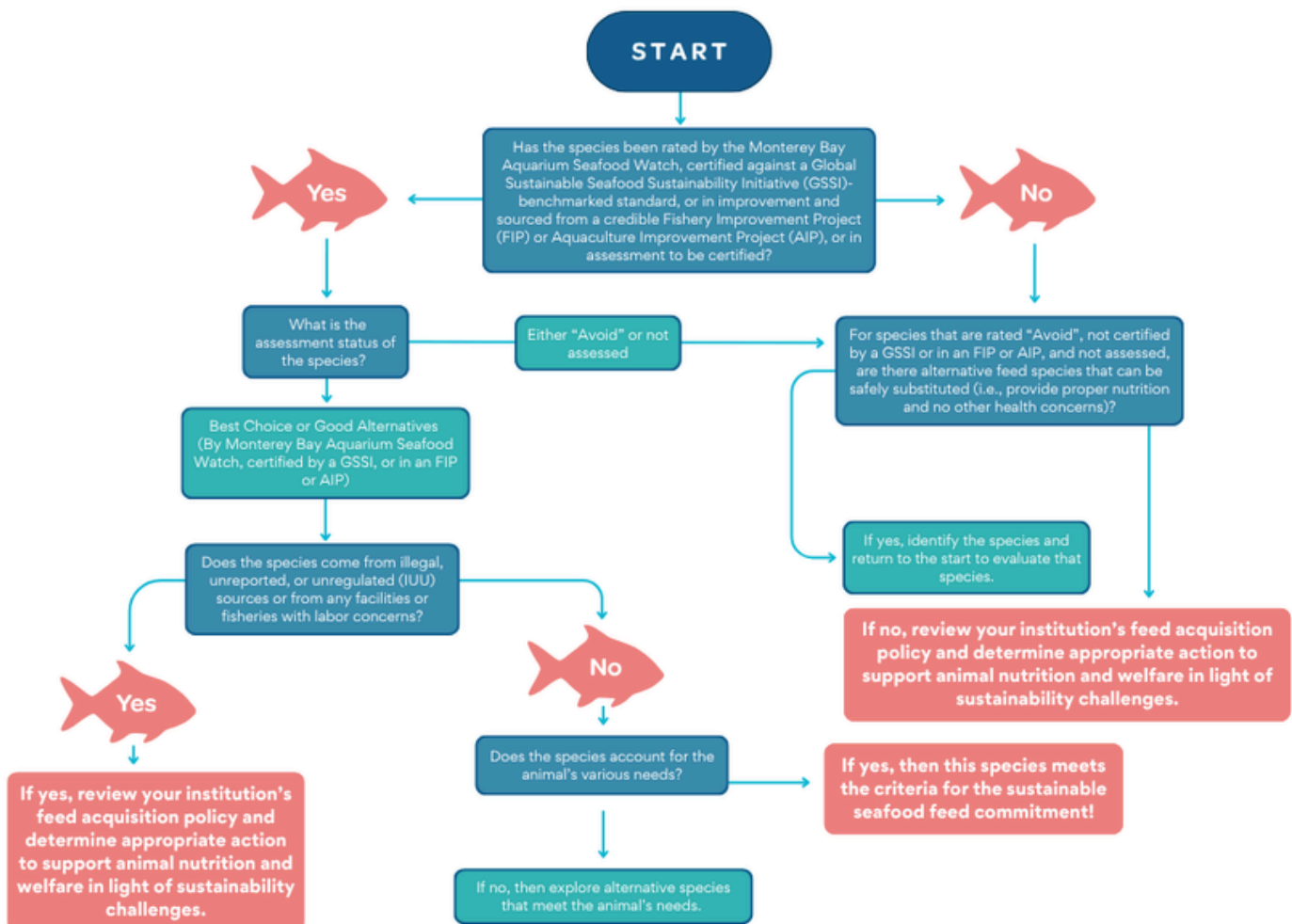
When it comes to choosing sustainable seafood alternatives, there is no “one size fits all” solution. Each decision must take into account the unique needs of the animal’s diet, the availability of responsibly sourced products, and the economic realities that influence both producers and consumers. Sustainable swaps require balancing environmental stewardship with practicality to ensure that seafood choices support healthy ocean ecosystems and continue to support animals’ needs while remaining accessible and affordable. This section provides examples of sustainable seafood options available and the key considerations that guide responsible decision-making across the seafood supply chain.



Sustainable Seafood Feed for Animals in Our Care Decision Tree

For every species of seafood that you use for feed (whole or processed), use this decision tree to determine whether it is being sourced sustainably.

To download the PDF of this decision tree click [here](#).



Animal Welfare and Nutrition

According to the AZA Nutrition Advisory Group, the most appropriate diet for your animal is one that accounts for its nutritional, husbandry, behavioral, and clinical needs as well as individual preferences. The recommended feeding strategy for AZA institutions is to:



- Aim to provide a nutritionally balanced diet.
- Provide a diet that reasonably stimulates natural feeding behaviors.
- Provide a nutritionally balanced diet that the animal consumes consistently.
- Provide a diet that meets all of the above criteria, and is practical and economical to feed.

Nutritional Recommendations for Seafood Feed

Recommendations include:

- **Diversify your diets** - all piscivorous animals should be eating at least 3 different types of seafood, 4-5 if you can. This can help ensure diet sustainability in a landscape where seafood types can become unavailable with little notice.
- **Work with your vendors** to expand your available options and select alternatives to red/avoid listed species.
- **Weigh all seafood waste** from each of your animal areas annually and evaluate opportunities to reduce or repurpose wasted seafood.

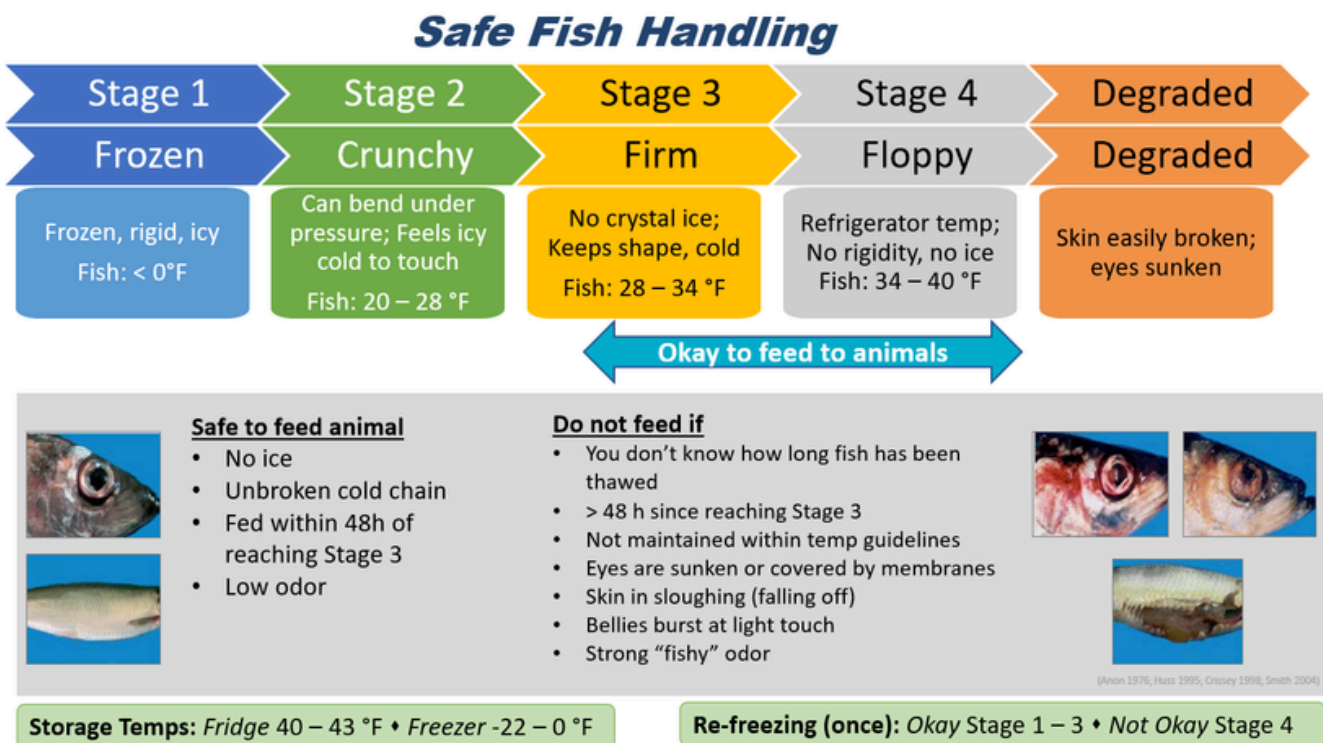
- **Store and rotate your frozen seafood** by catch date, not delivery date to maximize quality and minimize waste.
- **Review updated fish handling guidelines** - new slightly longer thaw times for non-marine mammal feeds and ability to repackage frozen items can help reduce waste.
- **Ensure diet sustainability is considered** in your institutional collection planning process.

As the seafood landscape evolves, diversifying your animal diets is essential for long-term diet sustainability. Relying on just a few seafood items, such as capelin and herring, poses nutritional and economic risks if those sources become unreliable (and both of these species have seen disruptions in recent years). To mitigate this, aim to provide at least three different types of seafood regularly to all piscivorous animals, with four to five options if possible. Expand the variety of foods your animals are willing to consume, including alternative seafood options, locally sourced items, and commercially available gel diets. This will provide greater flexibility in meeting future dietary needs.

Additionally, integrate feed sustainability into your institution's collection planning process. If a species that primarily consumes a red-listed fish does not align with your institution's educational, conservation, or population management goals, it may be worth reconsidering its place in your collection.

One of the most effective ways to enhance seafood sustainability is by minimizing waste. Begin by assessing the amount of seafood waste generated in your institution. Track seafood scraps from processing, quality control, and uneaten food for at least one week. Afterward, review the findings with relevant teams to identify opportunities for reducing or repurposing waste. [The USDA's updated 2023 guidelines](#) allow for slightly extended shelf life for many types of seafood, which can help reduce discarded fish. Using Individually Quick Frozen (IQF) seafood instead of thawing entire blocks daily may reduce waste and be more cost-effective, even if IQF items are priced higher per unit. Alternatively, consider using larger blocks of frozen fish. USDA guidelines also permit repackaging frozen fish into smaller, more manageable portions, which can reduce both food waste and packaging waste.

Maximizing the quality of seafood is another key approach to reducing waste. Store seafood based on the "first in, first out" principle, using the *catch date* rather than the *delivery date*. Sometimes, older fish may be delivered after newer stock, and this can lead to unnecessary waste due to poorer quality (older) fish in use. Review the USDA's infographic on seafood quality to ensure that you're not discarding safe-to-feed fish based on overly stringent standards. Finally, check your inventory for signs of seafood fraud—look out for inaccurate dates, season mismatches, or vague catch location details, which could indicate poor-quality or misrepresented products.



Ongoing Initiatives

Several initiatives are in development to further support sustainable seafood practices related to nutrition. Disney is conducting a study to understand how the nutrient content of seafood changes with extended storage. The WildBytes group is compiling data on the nutrient composition of aquarium and zoo-fed seafood types, along with other aquarium and zoo feed ingredients to support publicly accessible nutrition tools like [Zoo Diet NaviGator](#) and the [National Animal Nutrition Program feed composition website](#).

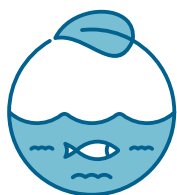
Guidelines to Include in a Sustainable Seafood Sourcing Policy

Nearly all respondents in the pilot evaluation reported that they consider the sustainability of fisheries when purchasing seafood for animal feed. However, only a small number indicated that they have a formal process or policy in place to guide sustainable feed procurement. Among the institutions that do maintain formal policies or standard operating procedures, several common elements emerged:



Defined staff roles and operating procedures

Policies may outline the roles and responsibilities of staff involved in the seafood feed procurement and management process, including purchasing, receiving, handling, and recordkeeping. Clear operating procedures help ensure consistency, accountability, and adherence to sustainability standards across departments.



Sourcing priorities and criteria for alternatives

Institutions may establish clear sourcing hierarchies and criteria for acceptable alternatives. **Example:** One institution prioritizes sourcing local and domestic seafood products. When local sourcing is not possible, the product must come from a fishery or aquaculture operation that is certified to a Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI)-benchmarked standard, is engaged in a credible Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) or Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP), or is currently undergoing assessment toward certification.



Accountability measures

Policies may include mechanisms to ensure compliance with sustainability standards. For example, institutions may conduct an annual sustainability audit of seafood sourcing to evaluate adherence to procurement guidelines and identify opportunities for improvement.



Vendor requirements

Institutions may require vendors to provide documentation demonstrating sustainable sourcing practices. Additional considerations may include the quality of products supplied, packaging and packing materials, and harvest or collection methods used.



Product inventory and sourcing information

Policies may include maintaining a list of commonly sourced seafood products, including information such as frequency of purchase, nutritional value, and handling and storage procedures.



Procurement tracking documentation

Institutions may maintain a tracking system for seafood purchases that includes key data fields such as:

- Vendor
- Species
- Scientific name
- Source location (capture or farm location)
- Gear type or production system
- Sustainability rating or certification status
- Preferred choices
- Quantity and purchase date

To support institutions interested in formalizing sustainable sourcing practices, the Aquarium Conservation Partnership (ACP) and the AZA SAFE Shark and Ray Program plan to develop a template procurement guide and a template Request for Proposals (RFP) for vendors that institutions can edit and adopt as part of their commitment.



Making a Business Case for Sourcing Sustainable Seafood

Developing a business case for sourcing sustainable seafood begins with a thorough assessment of your current seafood purchases, including sourcing origins, sustainability ratings, and environmental impacts. Understanding your starting point allows your institution to identify opportunities for improvement and prioritize actions that will have the greatest impact. Clearly articulating the benefits of transitioning to sustainable feed—such as reducing your ecological footprint, aligning with conservation and climate goals, enhancing institutional reputation, and supporting the long-term health of ocean ecosystems—is critical for gaining buy-in from leadership and staff.

Equally important is engaging a broad range of stakeholders, from executive leadership and animal care teams to procurement staff, vendors, and even visitors. Inclusive engagement fosters alignment, ensures practical considerations are addressed, and builds shared ownership of sustainability goals. Strengthening the business case can also involve analyzing potential cost implications and savings, identifying risks associated with unsustainable sourcing, and establishing metrics and reporting frameworks to track progress. Finally, exploring partnerships with peer institutions, suppliers, or certification programs, through this project can leverage collective purchasing power, reduce costs, and amplify the impact of sustainable sourcing initiatives.

By combining these elements—assessment, benefits, stakeholder engagement, financial and risk analysis, accountability, and partnerships—institutions can create a compelling, actionable business case for integrating sustainable seafood into animal care programs.

Benefits

Adopting sustainable seafood sourcing for animals in our care provides a range of environmental, financial, organizational, socioeconomic, and public engagement and education benefits, creating value for both your institution and the broader ocean ecosystem.

Environmental Benefits

- Protects wild fish populations by avoiding overfished or endangered species.
- Reduces bycatch and habitat damage associated with unsustainable fishing practices.
- Encourages transparency and traceability, reducing the chances of purchasing from harmful or illegal fishing.
- Preserves ocean biodiversity and promotes healthier marine ecosystems.
- Aligns with conservation missions by modeling sustainable practices to the public.

Financial Benefits

- Enables long-term cost savings through reliable, stable supply chains.
- Reduces risk of price volatility tied to overfishing and resource depletion.
- Improves budgeting through predictable sourcing and supplier relationships.
- Increases access to funding, grants, and partnerships linked to sustainability goals.
- Enhances brand reputation, potentially attracting more visitors, donors, and sponsors.
- Lowers potential regulatory or compliance costs by aligning with sustainable standards.
- Supports local or regional suppliers, reducing transportation costs and lead times in coastal geographies.
- Reduces exposure to supply chain disruptions, reputational risk, and regulatory non-compliance.

Organizational Benefits

- Strengthens alignment with the organization's conservation and sustainability mission.
- Demonstrates leadership and credibility in environmental stewardship.
- Provides clear guidelines for procurement teams, improving efficiency and consistency.
- Supports staff engagement and morale by reinforcing shared values and purpose.
- Enhances transparency and accountability across departments and suppliers.
- Builds stronger partnerships with like-minded institutions, suppliers, and certifying bodies.
- Strategic alignment: connects sustainable sourcing practices directly to institutional goals, visitor engagement, and mission impact.
- Increases your institution's resilience by preparing for future regulatory or accreditation requirements.
- Encourages data collection and performance tracking that can inform broader conservation science.

Socioeconomic Benefits

- Supports fair labor practices and safer working conditions in seafood supply chains.
- Promotes livelihoods of small-scale, local, and Indigenous fishers and producers.
- Encourages economic resilience in coastal and fishing communities.
- Helps drive market demand toward ethical and sustainable industry practices.
- Fosters equitable access to resources by avoiding exploitative or illegal sourcing.
- Contributes to food security by supporting long-term viability of fish stocks.
- Aligns with global sustainability and social responsibility goals.

Public Engagement and Education Benefits

- Creates opportunities for education, storytelling, and public engagement around sustainability.
- Builds public trust by demonstrating transparency and action on ocean health issues.
- Inspires visitors to make more sustainable seafood choices in their own lives.
- Creates opportunities for media coverage and thought leadership around ocean conservation.

Stakeholder Engagement Recommendations

Engaging Leadership

Bringing the topic of sustainable seafood to leadership offers a valuable opportunity to further align zoo and aquarium operations with core conservation values. Whether applied to food service, animal diets, or public education, sustainable seafood practices can demonstrate institutional leadership in ocean health and responsible sourcing. The following points are intended to support staff and advocates in starting a constructive, solutions oriented conversation with decision makers.

- **Frame it in animal welfare:** Diversifying and ensuring long-term sustainable seafood resources is in the best interest of animals in care.
- **Connect to your mission:** Align sustainable seafood purchasing with conservation messaging and mission statement.
- **Involve your team:** Encourage cross-department collaboration with purchasing, education, and sustainability leads.

Engaging Staff

Engaging staff in sustainable seafood feed purchasing starts with awareness, collaboration, and clear goals. Staff across departments should understand how feed choices have the potential to align the institution's conservation mission. By involving staff in the decision making process and promoting transparency, zoos and aquariums can foster a culture of sustainability and accountability in their seafood sourcing practices.

- **Educate staff** on the environmental impact of seafood feed choices and the benefits of sustainable sourcing. See page 7 of [AZA Aquatic Collections Sustainability Committee's Toolkit](#) for examples of internal messaging.
- **Share institutional sustainability goals** and how feed purchasing aligns with broader conservation efforts.

- **Involve key departments** (e.g., animal care, nutrition, sustainability, purchasing) in feed selection discussions and supplier evaluations.
- **Create feedback loops** so staff can share observations on feed performance and sustainability.
- **Highlight success stories** and recognize staff contributions to sustainable initiatives.

Engaging Vendors

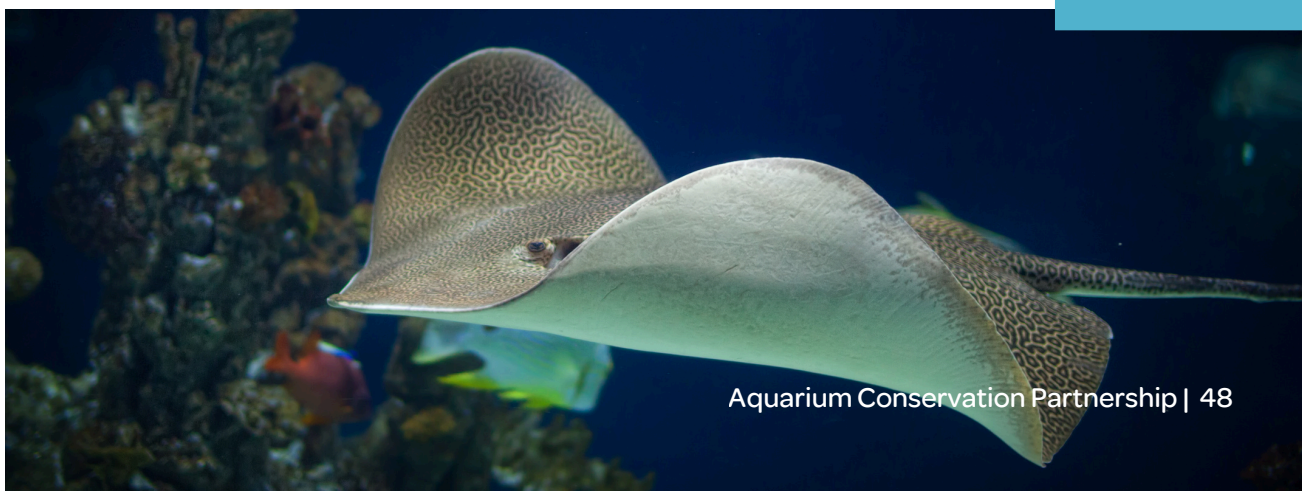
Building strong, transparent relationships with vendors is essential for aligning seafood sourcing practices with conservation values. Zoos and aquariums can lead by setting clear sustainability expectations, asking informed questions, and collaborating with suppliers to prioritize responsibly sourced seafood. These conversations not only influence your institution's impact, but can also drive broader change across the supply chain.

- **Clearly communicate your sustainability goals** and sourcing policies when initiating or renewing vendor contracts.
- **Request documentation and transparency** around sourcing practices, including certification.
- **Prioritize vendors aligned with third-party standards** such as Seafood Watch "Best Choices" and "Good Alternatives."
- **Stay informed and updated on seafood sustainability trends** so you can bring new insights to vendor discussions.
- **Support traceability** by requesting supply chain visibility and avoiding products with unknown origins.

Engaging Visitors

Communicating your zoo or aquarium's commitment to sustainable seafood purchasing is a powerful way to inspire visitors and build trust. By highlighting how your institution supports ocean conservation through responsible sourcing, and connecting that to tools like Seafood Watch, you can encourage guests to make informed choices in their own lives. Storytelling, transparency, and interactive experiences help turn your sustainability practices into meaningful visitor engagement.

- **Promote your sustainable** sourcing practices through signage, tours, and digital displays—show visitors that you "walk the talk."
- **Feature partnerships and certifications** (e.g., Seafood Watch, MSC, ASC) in exhibits or food service areas to reinforce credibility.
- **Use storytelling** to share how animal diets are carefully chosen to protect wild fisheries and ocean health.
- **Train staff and volunteers** to speak confidently about sustainable seafood during animal talks and guest interactions.
- **Display Seafood Watch or other sustainable seafood program** guides and QR codes to the app so visitors can make sustainable choices at home.
- **Show behind-the-scenes content** (videos, talks, or graphics) on how feeds are sourced and why it matters.
- **Highlight local impacts** by showcasing regional seafood choices or collaborations with sustainable fisheries.
- **Encourage action** by connecting visitors with pledges, campaigns, or conservation efforts they can join.



An underwater scene featuring a large, white shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, there is a vibrant orange sea anemone with long, flowing tentacles, situated on a dark, textured coral reef. Several small, colorful fish, including blue and yellow ones, are scattered throughout the water. The overall lighting is dim, creating a deep blue atmosphere.

Communicating with Audiences



Sharing our collective challenges and successes with our audiences, in-person and online, can inspire individuals to consider joining this effort by committing to purchasing sustainable seafood when shopping or dining out.

A communications sub-group of the Sustainable Feed Work Group is developing a [communications toolkit](#) with the following goals:

- Effectively communicate project goals, objectives, outcomes and outputs to targeted audiences;
- Increase project participation, disseminate results and raise awareness and motivate others to review and consider their own policies and protocols around sustainable feed for animals in their care; and
- To satisfy requirements of the CGF grant proposal around communications objectives.

The toolkit will provide messaging, sample social media content, graphics, and timelines for a communications campaign for this project.

Additional resources include:

[AZA SAFE Shark and Ray Messaging Frameworks](#) - The framework was developed in consultation with a cross-section of the shark science community. The Framework links to the communication priorities of global scientists working on shark research and conservation, and is organized into 4 broad themes under which specific messaging about sharks and rays can be developed and tested.

[AZA Aquatic Sustainability Communications Toolkit](#) - The aquatic sustainability communications toolkit, developed in partnership with members of the conservation education committee has been published.

An underwater scene featuring a large, light-colored shark swimming in the background. In the foreground, there is a vibrant orange sea anemone with many tentacles, situated on a dark, rocky coral reef. A small, striped fish is visible near the base of the anemone. The overall lighting is dim, creating a deep blue atmosphere.

Resources

Project Resources

Inform Evaluation Summary

This report was produced by Inform Evaluation & Research for AZA SAFE Shark and Ray in October 2025. See [here](#).

FishChoice Tools

The My Assessment Tool was a key, now-retired feature on FishChoice.com that allowed seafood businesses, restaurants, and chefs to evaluate the sustainability of their product sourcing. See [here](#) for a webinar about the 'My Assessment Tool' and [here](#) for an in-depth guide.

2024 Assessment Report

At the 2024 AZA Annual Conference in Calgary, Alberta, Canada, the 2024 Sustainable Seafood Feed Analysis of Sourced Aquatic Feed was presented by Bianca Santos, ACP Communications Coordinator. See [here](#) for the indepth analysis.

Appendix A - Work Group Members

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Appendix B - Process and Timeline for Making the Commitment - 2026

To strengthen our collective impact and ensure that diverse perspectives are represented, we are expanding the sustainable seafood feed commitment group beyond the initial pilot institutions. By welcoming additional ACP and/or SAFE Shark and Ray member zoos and aquariums into this effort, we aim to broaden member input, foster collaboration across a wider community, and create a more unified voice in advancing sustainable feed practices. This expansion will allow us to share knowledge, address challenges collectively, and develop solutions that reflect the needs and experiences of a larger network, ultimately supporting the long-term success of sustainable seafood sourcing within the AZA community.

Pilot Project Commitment

Pilot institutions participated in this project by:

1. Making a commitment to:
 - Source sustainable seafood for the top 10 assessed seafood species we collectively purchase by volume.
 - Source sustainable seafood or sustainable alternatives, including those in improvement and sourced from a credible Fishery Improvement Project (FIP) or Aquaculture Improvement Project (AIP), or in assessment to be certified, for all “avoid rated” seafood species that we collectively purchase.
 - Not knowingly purchase seafood from illegal, unreported, or unregulated (IUU) sources or from any facilities or fisheries with labor concerns.
2. Helping identify alternatives and source more sustainable seafood feed.
3. Participating in an evaluation of the pilot.
3. Communicating these efforts to our audiences to increase consumer demand for sustainable seafood.
4. Making recommendations for any changes to the commitment and a pathway to include the broader AZA community.

Commitment Launch

The steps to join this commitment are as follows:

1. **Participate in an informational webinar on April 21st.** This webinar will be held annually and recorded.
2. **Make the commitment** by signing this [Google form](#) by May 15, 2026.
3. **Review the commitment Google folder.** The [shared Google folder](#) will contain a guidance document, reporting templates, meeting calendar, and other resources.
4. **Identify a point of contact** to lead the effort at your institution.
5. **Create internal goals:** Each institution will define 3–5 internal goals tied to sustainable feed adoption, with measurable outcomes and owners.
6. **Develop an internal seafood feed sourcing policy.** using [this link](#) as a template.
7. **Participate in meetings (held every six weeks):** Each meeting will provide support to help institutions in making and meeting the commitment and focus on progress, barriers, and resource sharing.
8. **Assess and report out on feed every two years.** Each participating organization is asked to conduct biannual assessments of the seafood they purchase to measure and report on progress. We will use a standardized tool to evaluate sourcing, certifications, risk, and improvements.
9. **Communicate with your audiences** using our toolkits on sustainable seafood.



Commitment Meetings

The following table is a proposed schedule with meeting topics based on [Inform Evaluation's Sustainable Feed Pilot Report findings](#):

Month	Topic
March	Final draft of Guidance Document completed & launch of the full commitment with steps and timeline at AZA Mid-Year and via email. Open to all ACP & AZA SAFE Shark and Ray members.
April	Launch of pilot expansion commitment via webinar on April 21st . Open to all ACP & AZA SAFE Shark and Ray members.
May	Mid-May group sign up closes. Host our first expanded group meeting. Internal procurement standard focus.
June	Group meeting. Universal procurement standard focus. Wants & needs.
July	Group meeting. Vendor Conversations. How can we work as a group to continue to include vendors & work harmoniously.
September	Group meeting. Nutritional focused sustainability implementation and conversations about a database of diet mixes for common species.
November	Group meeting. Messaging for sustainable feed. How do we educate our staff and visitors on sustainable seafood feed for animals in our care.
January	Group meeting. Year reflections and group goals for the following year.



Aquarium
Conservation
Partnership



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