

HK's marine conservation efforts thwarted by politics, consumers save the day

FISHERIES **MARITIME PROTECTION** by [Alex Fok](#) | on November 13, 2015 | [0 Comments](#) | in [Energy & Environment](#) | [Like it](#)



A smart seafood festival draws attention to Hong Kong's lack of conservation implementation, brazen political vote buying and the futility of Hong Kong's fishing industry. Consumers, you are our only hope.

A smart seafood festival makes one wonder why Hong Kong has any commercial fishery and raises questions about massive subsidy of a dying industry.

Ocean Recovery Alliance, a registered charitable organisation in Hong Kong, is collaborating with other green groups to organise a month-long **Kin Hong (Healthy) Seafood Festival** to promote eating seafood in a sustainable way. As part of the event, a Seafood Deep Dive Cooking Demonstration will be held at the restaurant Gitone in Sai Wan Ho on November 22.

This city's fish – and fishery – are dead in the water

Earlier this month, a press conference was held at the Maritime Museum on a recent study conducted by Dr Rashid Sumailia and Dr William Cheung of the University of British Columbia, Canada. Findings show that overfishing and habitat destruction are now posing threats to not only the maritime biomass but also our daily seafood consumption and economic returns generated from fisheries.

Titled *Boom or Bust: The Future of Fish in the South China Sea*, the research sheds light on a drop in fisheries catch and landed value from the South China Sea. If nothing is done to alter the trend, in thirty years' time the biomass of all studied species, including the popular groupers (石斑魚) and yellow croakers (黃花魚), could drop from 9% to 59%. Prices will rise. The groupers in particular will be priced eight times higher compared with the 2010 level as supplies run low. Aggravating the situation, about 10 million tonnes of fish are wasted annually owing to bad fishing practices, said Dr Sumailia.

“One of the findings of the study demonstrates that the way fish are caught is no longer sustainable,” said Doug Woodring, co-founder of Ocean Recovery Alliance in Hong Kong. “It is time to take action before it is too late.”

A solution is for fishermen to turn away from unsustainable fishery methods – or fishing all together.

Hong Kong deadweight

THE GOVERNMENT'S TRAWLING BAN IS WORKING.

The Hong Kong Government introduced a total trawling ban in local waters in late 2012 which prohibits the use of pair, stern, shrimp and hang trawlers. Affected inshore trawler owners were compensated by *ex gratia* payments under a HK\$1.72 billion scheme.

Hong Kong is among a handful of countries or regions which impose trawling bans of one sort or another in their respective waters. These countries or regions include Australia, Brazil, Canada, China, Indonesia, Malaysia, the Gulf of Castellammare in Northwest Sicily, and Kerala, India. The early positive impact on the city's degrading marine ecology is increasingly witnessed by local fishermen and divers. The Government is now collaborating with the University of Hong Kong to conduct a more scientific assessment of the policy some two years after implementation.

HONG KONG'S HEAVILY SUBSIDISED FISHERY BUYS VOTES FOR THE LEGCO AND CE ELECTIONS, BUT BARELY SUPPLIES 10% OF HONG KONG CONSUMED SEAFOOD.

In another effort, the government pledged to set up protection areas along with other measures to control fishing in Hong Kong waters in the [Fisheries Protection \(Amendment\) Ordinance 2012](#), which came into force in June 2012. The section under concern states:

- The Authority may make rules for the management and control of fishing in any fisheries protection area, including but not limited to the specification of any zone within any fisheries protection area and the prohibition of any fishing in the specified zone.*
- Any rules made under this section...may prescribe penalties for the contravention not exceeding a fine of \$200,000 and imprisonment for 6 months.*

But three, going on four, years later, no actual policy of such protection zones has been implemented. The government is in a sort of bureaucratic limbo, circling the target in a prolonged morass of 'research' and 'consultation'.

Open restriction

There are other notable measures put forth by the Agriculture, Fisheries and Conservation Department, such as the implementation of an artificial reef project since 1996 to enhance maritime biodiversity. But as Professor Yvonne Sadvoy from the University of Hong Kong's School of Biological Sciences points out, the policy has so far failed to deliver any substantial effects since the long awaited implementation of no-take zones in Hong Kong waters remains pending.

*CONSUMERS, MINDING INTERNATIONALLY
RECOGNISED MONITORING, ARE THE
ONLY HOPE FOR SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD.*

"What do you expect from the artificial reef project if fishermen can still do their business in the waters?" Professor Sadvoy asked.

The Hong Kong authorities did set up marine parks in Hoi Ha Wan, Yan Chau Tong, Sha Chau and Lung Kwu Chau, and Tung Ping Chau, but, technically speaking, these designated areas are not protection zones. 'Bona fide' fisherman or villagers who ordinarily reside near the marine park concerned can apply for a marine park fishing permit to continue fishing activities. There are currently hundreds of permit holders.

A bizarre subsidy from the north

The mainland authorities have been funding the fisheries industry in Hong Kong and Macao with an annual grant of \$20billion RMB, distributed as cash deposits to fishermen, since 2009. To receive the grant, fishermen must attend a form of national education training. Fishermen representative organisations vote in the LegCo functional constituency seat Agriculture and Fisheries. In the 2012 election, the 123 votes determined the results of the election, returning a pro-establishment figure to

the seat. Farmers and fishermen also hold 5%, or 60 seats, in the CE election. In the last election, 57 of 60 backed CY Leung.

In addition, the Hong Kong government grants fishermen an exemption from paying tax on diesel. An [i-Cable report](#) estimates some fishermen receive up to \$1 million HKD a year – a tidy monthly salary of over \$80,000HKD a month to pick over a decimated marine ecosystem.

Altering the policy would be difficult given the vested interests within the establishment, and the LegCo's functional constituency. Some argue cutting the subsidies would lead to a mass exodus from the industry. However, given only 10% of Hong Kong's consumption comes from Hong Kong's water, it seems like that would have minimal impact from a consumer standpoint.

Consumers rule the day

With genuine impact more likely to come from consumer choice in action, the Kin Hong Seafood Festival has been joined by some 30 restaurants who have committed to having at least one certified sustainable seafood dish on their menus during the period. The Marine Stewardship Council and the Aquaculture Stewardship Council are the primary organisations setting up certification standards for sustainable seafood worldwide.

Given that Hong Kong's fishing industry now seems to primarily exist to shore up safe pro-establishment votes, the diesel subsidy and mainland subsidies could probably be better spent upfront as cash handouts for votes, instead of having to pretend they are industry support. An industrial fishing ban (recreational fishing only) would allow stocks to recover and achieve conservation aims. Consumers hold the real power to impact offshore fishing practices through their choices under an effective regional monitoring programme.

Given vote buying politics only harm the fisheries, consumer choice will have to save the planet on its own.