

Research boosting environment

Anna Yallop

Unless you've been asleep at the wheel, you can't have failed to notice the rapid escalation of worldwide interest in alleviating the strain humans have put on the environment over the last 200 or so years.

From climate change to sea level rise, extreme weather to plastics in the ocean or extinction of wildlife, there has been a move to focus more on how we can undo the damage we've caused and ensure that we and future generations retain this planet we call home.

I've spent the last month or so looking over the range of projects that Seafood Innovations Ltd (SIL) has co-funded since its inception in 2004. As a reminder, SIL (funded by the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment) co-funds research projects with industry to help add value to the seafood sector. These projects focus on technically challenging science, or the development of novel technologies that create benefits for industry. Examples include working out how to domesticate species, developing genetic markers, utilising robotics, improving harvesting techniques, or creating high-value functional foods.

During my investigation, what struck me is how many projects have recently been initiated that respond to specific environmental challenges and ones in fact, that don't create direct economic benefits via the development of products or services that seafood companies can then sell. These projects do, however create highly important research outcomes that we would all agree are certainly worth having if we want both the seafood industry and the environment to thrive.

SIL's initial goal in 2004 was mainly to generate economic benefits for the seafood sector and whilst its goals are largely still the same, albeit with a slight tweak to also look for ways to improve productivity and increase volumes of exports, increasingly, we're funding projects that are about understanding the science around ocean habitats, learning more about rare marine species, developing technologies to alleviate any impacts of fishing and the like.

Examples of some of the projects we're involved with include: a study monitoring the at-risk king shag population, finfish seabed recovery; whale

migration path tracking; bycatch alleviation; polystyrene replacements (e.g. Zealafoam, Woolcool) and optimising fish diets to reduce the impact on the environment.

All of these projects have been initiated and co-funded by industry to the tune of millions of dollars – a very significant contribution towards research that will benefit not singular companies, not even a singular sector, but will benefit regions, animal populations, tourism, scientific knowledge, the health of our oceans and New Zealand's prized reputation as an "unspoiled" nation.



Photo, Tamzin Henderson.

Increasingly, these types of projects involve multiple parties both within the seafood sector and across external groups such as councils, the Department of Conservation and iwi, demonstrating a willingness to work collectively that is bound to have payoffs for the wellbeing of our oceans, our wildlife and our future.

Other examples of environmentally-focused projects I'm aware of include ones to reduce and/or reuse waste, developing tools to monitor fish farms' footprints, reducing carbon emissions through smart fishing, plastic-use auditing and net technologies that safely release undersized fish. The range of projects that companies are looking at is widespread and reflects a growing interest in ways the seafood sector can put value back into the habitat from which it generates its income.

Of course the companies involved in such projects generate some economic payoff from being involved in these projects including an enhanced reputation with consumers, reduced costs and possibly even new products generated but what has been a pleasant surprise for me is the engagement, motivation and investment I've seen across the industry to do its part in ensuring the environment

comes out better off as a result of this research.

At the end of the day, we all need to put the effort in to making sure we behave in ways that enhance our environment and leave as little impact on the world as possible. It is just a start but it's nice to play even a small part in initiatives that have the potential to improve our environment even just a little. If you're interested in such initiatives, feel free to contact me to talk further.



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