

Learnings From Japan's First Decade of Sustainable Seafood Work

Executive Summary



January 2025

Forward by the Domestic Fisheries Working Group

It has been more than a decade since efforts started in Japan to transform our seafood industry and build a movement for sustainability. In that time, sustainable seafood has become a priority in government policies, business actions, and school curriculums. We've achieved major policy reforms that have strengthened Japan's fisheries management and increased protection against illegally caught seafood entering the Japanese market. Along with policy reform, we've seen a better understanding of the concept of sustainability among the public and the inclusion of sustainability in business practices. Finally, we've seen the development of a network of advocates, inclusive of NGOs, government officials, academics, fishers, business leaders, and others who have helped realize these achievements.

The David and Lucile Packard Foundation has been a key investor in the sustainable seafood movement in Japan. They commissioned an evaluation of work over the past decade that highlights the successes, best practices, and opportunities for continued progress, summarized in the following pages. We look forward to building on that progress in the next decade of work to continue to strengthen the government's efforts to ensure sustainable management of Japan's fisheries.



Progress from Japan's First Decade of Sustainable Seafood Work

Since 2016, the Packard Foundation has been supporting work to **build a sustainable seafood movement in Japan that addresses challenges facing fisheries domestically and globally.**

The Foundation supported the creation of the Domestic Fisheries Working Group (DFWG), a coalition of nonprofit organizations that were well-positioned to lead efforts to reform Japan's domestic fishery management and advocate for import control rules to prevent illegally caught seafood from entering the Japanese market.

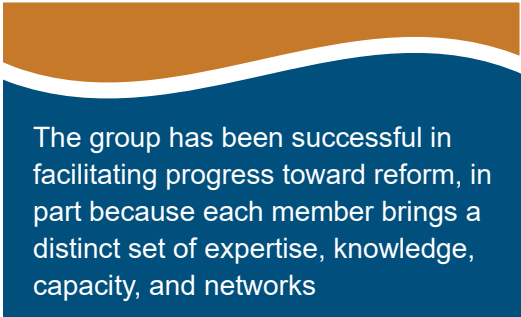
These efforts were bolstered by support from other key funders, including Oceankind who has supported domestic policy reform, and the Walton Family Foundation, Oceans 5, and the Moore Foundation who have supported joint efforts to combat illegal fishing.

In 2024, the Foundation commissioned a retrospective of the first decade of Japan's sustainable seafood movement to better understand the accomplishments thus far, remaining challenges for the movement, and opportunities for continuing progress. The following summary shares insights from this retrospective.

The Leadership of the Domestic Fisheries Working Group

When work on sustainable seafood began more than a decade ago, there was a limited number of NGOs working on fisheries policy in Japan. The DFWG was established to harness the expertise, networks, and capacities of its members, which included NGOs and other aligned organizations, to put forth a stronger collective effort.

The group has been successful in facilitating progress toward reform, in part because each member brings a distinct set of expertise, knowledge, capacity, and networks, including relationships with fishing communities, that the group has been able to leverage effectively.



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This network of grantees has the potential to scale progress in Japan over the next decade with increased funding. Below, we've identified the DFWG members and advisors and their approaches, roles, and expertise that can continue supporting efforts in Japan:

Environmental Defense Fund

- **Drawing connections and fostering constructive** dialogues between fisheries officers and researchers in Asia and the United States.
- **Leveraging EDF's international experiences to inform recommendations** on early drafts of reform initiatives and, in collaboration with partner organizations, share best practices, case studies, and lessons learned from other countries undertaking similar improvements in sustainable fisheries.
- **Partnering with fishery agencies** to support the implementation of tangible reform activities.

- **Conducting local demonstrations and on-the-ground engagement with fisheries stakeholders** to adapt to new reform measures, overcome technical issues and challenges, and establish a resource management education and communication platform for fishermen, officers, and researchers.

UMITO Partners

- **Taking a bottom-up approach** focused on raising fishermen's awareness about scientifically backed resource management and providing technical advice for the fisheries to adopt resource management.
- **Representing fishermen's voices** in consortiums of experts discussing TAC allocations and becoming the hub to connect different fishing communities, policymakers, industries, and scientists.
- **Demonstrating sustainability initiatives** with fishing communities on the ground to help change and implement the fisheries reform.

USI

- **Providing expertise on policymaking processes** and strategy development to influence government actions.
- **Creating ties with members of the Diet**, including Head of the Fisheries Policy Division, to inform them about the necessity of and recommendations for the fisheries reform through in-person study sessions.
- **Facilitating stakeholder engagement dialogue** in partnership with academia and other organizations, and producing political recommendations by preparing reports to provide evidence of the need for fisheries reform.


Seafood Legacy (advisor)

- **Critiquing fisheries-related challenges in Japan** early in the process and using positionality to voice concerns other stakeholders were not able to.
- **Bringing together major companies** to coordinate market transformation.
- **Being a member of the government committees** to participate in the official discussion process.

Key Accomplishments

The Domestic Fisheries Working Group along with other partners active in Japan have realized several achievements that signal the growing momentum for sustainable seafood in Japan, including policy outcomes and changes in perceptions and popularity of sustainable seafood. Their key accomplishments include:

Reform of Japan's domestic Fisheries Law in 2018. The DFWG's efforts in the region culminated in the Japanese Diet and the administration of Prime Minister Abe enacting the first reform of the fishing law in 70 years. The updated fisheries law incorporates a focus on science-based fisheries management practices and requires data from stock assessments to inform decisions about how much fish can be sustainably harvested from each fishery.



The DFWG's efforts in the region culminated in the Japanese Diet and the administration of Prime Minister Abe enacting the first reform of the fishing law in 70 years

This reform was followed in 2020 with the Roadmap for Promoting New Resource Management, the guidance for implementing the new fisheries management policy. This guidance helps make the goals of the fisheries policy reform a reality by spelling out the requirements for stock assessments, electronic landing data, and other key elements that are needed to implement science-based fisheries management.

Adoption of import control rules for IUU fishing in 2022. The DWFG also supported efforts by the Anti-IUU Forum Japan to address illegal fishing. To ensure that progress managing Japan's domestic fisheries more sustainably was not undermined by the import of illegal seafood caught in other countries' waters, the Diet passed a new law requiring imported wild seafood to have a certificate of legal catch from a foreign government and domestically caught seafood in Japan to have catch documentation. Japan joined the EU and US in taking the lead on adopting stringent requirements for traceable, legal seafood and encouraging other countries to consider enacting similar import control rules.

Improved awareness of and increased dialogue on sustainable fisheries and IUU fishing in Japan. These critical policy outcomes would not have been possible without the shifts in awareness and perception of sustainable seafood and the role of markets in promoting it. At the outset of these efforts, general understanding of sustainability and IUU issues in Japan was low. Since then, awareness of sustainability has improved substantially among stakeholders, the general public, and industry. Today, most of the major seafood companies in Japan are now thinking about sustainability and incorporating sustainable practices into their operations, demonstrating the significant progress that has been made in the past decade.


Lessons Learned from Investments in Japan

There were several factors that contributed to the success of the movement and policy reforms. Below are some of the key insights from the retrospective:

Invest in building infrastructure to leverage the expertise and networks of individual members. Establishing a collective process early in the process was critical in Japan because individual leaders lacked the resources and capacity to scale the efforts alone. This was part of the catalyst for the formation of the DFWG. The DFWG not only was able to contribute to the accomplishments noted earlier, but was also able to serve as a foundation for efforts outside of fisheries reform to take advantage of opportunities when the political conditions were right. In

particular, the DFWG has collaborated with the Anti-IUU Forum Japan to ensure strategic alignment and share information and best practices.

Encourage interconnectedness between strategic approaches. The DFWG supported interconnectedness between systems and engagement of stakeholders including the government, academia, markets, and fisheries communities. There had been significant political momentum under the former long-standing administration, which appointed a DFWG member as the official member for the council for regulatory reform. However, this top-down approach left a gap in efforts to engage fishers and their communities. On-the-ground efforts including worker engagement were also critical to creating a strong case for the impacts of proposed reforms. Balancing the top-down and bottom-up efforts created durable solutions for successful reform implementation. The DFWG worked together to bring a strategic vision and structure to encourage stakeholder engagement for better outcomes throughout the process.



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Identify and engage experts. The DFWG identified champions in different sectors and empowered and supported them. For example, NGOs worked closely with key government officials and introduced best practices, and in turn, the government supported NGO activities and appointed NGO members to participate in government committees. Additionally, grantee partners worked closely with key policymakers in the National Diet to bring some core conservative members of the ruling party on board with their objectives.

Opportunities For Future Progress

Looking forward, we see many opportunities to continue this progress in Japan, as well as use the learnings and outcomes to benefit efforts globally. Two key opportunities are:

Established collaboration efforts and history of policy reform lay the groundwork for addressing human rights. Progress over the past decade is due in large part to a strong multistakeholder collaboration engaging the Japanese government, seafood businesses, civil society organizations, and fishing communities. These actors have realized policy change that advances environmental sustainability, and going forward it will be important to apply this approach to the human dimensions of sustainability as well as other issues such as addressing IUU. Along with this collaboration, the Japanese government has already demonstrated its leadership to begin addressing human rights abuses by ratifying key international treaties like the Port State Measures Agreement and the Cape Town Agreement. The government can continue to lead on aligning Japanese human rights law with international standards and best practices for worker-led, mandatory human rights due diligence.

Securing fishers' support for the reform and fostering effective, ongoing dialogue between governments, fisheries, researchers, and civil society are critical next steps for the successful implementation of the fisheries reform. Globally, there is a growing movement to ensure fishers' voices are heard in policy and regulatory decisions that directly impact their lives, from safe working conditions and fair wages to food security and cultural heritage. Over the past decade, the DFWG has been working to gradually and successfully develop valuable relationships

across sectors including with fishers, especially during this reform period. Continued efforts to enhance communication and build trustful relationships among governments, local fishers, researchers, and civil society are essential to establish common goals and collaboratively address challenges in implementing reforms such as introducing catch limits and upgrading resource management agreements.

Looking ahead, fishers must play a central role in the implementation of Japan's new fisheries law, guided by informed decisions and partnerships with major stakeholders, including researchers and civil society, who can provide expertise on catch limits, stock assessments, and mitigating the impacts of climate change. Fishers are the first to be impacted by new requirements, changes in fish populations, and the negative effects of climate change on ocean health.



About the Packard Foundation

At the [David and Lucile Packard Foundation](#), we work with people and communities to create enduring solutions for just societies and a healthy, resilient natural world. The Foundation has a long history of supporting ocean science and conservation, and we recently outlined the next evolution of our work in this space.

Our 10-year (2023-2033) Ocean initiative focuses on developing and implementing solutions that protect and restore ocean habitats and communities, achieve equitable and sustainable fisheries, end illegal fishing and human and worker rights abuses in seafood supply chains, and harness ocean-based climate solutions.

While the [Ocean initiative](#) will continue to support efforts to strengthen the sustainable seafood movement in Japan, specifically focused on the role of Japan in advancing human rights and equity in seafood supply chains, we are ending our funding for Japanese domestic fisheries policy work by 2026. This was a difficult decision informed by both the significant progress made by our partners to date and the hope that other funders will play an essential role in supporting continued fisheries management advancements in Japan.

Contact

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