

Australia's Sustainable Tuna Movement Creates Ripples across the Pacific

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As sustainability moves from a niche concern to a mainstream purchasing criterion, Australia's canned tuna sector has emerged as a global benchmark for responsible seafood sourcing. Today, more than 70 per cent of canned tuna sold in Australia carries the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) blue ecolabel, reflecting a remarkable industry-wide shift toward independently certified sustainable fisheries.

Driven by strong retailer commitments, growing consumer awareness, and increased availability of certified tuna from responsibly managed fisheries, Australia has demonstrated how collaboration across the seafood value chain can transform an entire category. The transition is particularly significant given Australia's heavy reliance on tuna sourced from the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, the world's largest tuna fishing region.

In this exclusive interview with NUFFOODS Spectrum, Anne Gabriel, MSC Program Director for Oceania and Singapore, discusses the key drivers behind Australia's rapid adoption of MSC-certified tuna, the pivotal role of retailers in shaping sustainable sourcing practices, the environmental impact of certification, and how Australia's experience could serve as a blueprint for other markets seeking to advance sustainable seafood consumption.

What were the key factors that enabled Australia to achieve such rapid industry-wide adoption of MSC-certified canned tuna compared with other global markets?

Several factors came together to make Australia's transformation of canned tuna possible, and it didn't happen overnight.

The foundation was a decade of trailblazing by John West, which introduced MSC-certified tuna to Australia back in 2012. That gave the market over ten years to build consumer familiarity with the label, demonstrate commercial viability, and show other brands and retailers what responsible sourcing at scale looks like. It set the standard others could follow.

Secondly and critically, the supply side caught up. Global MSC-certified tuna volumes have grown dramatically, with 3.1 million tonnes now landed annually, accounting for over half of the global wild tuna catch. MSC labelled tuna products grew 39 per cent from last year to around 400,000 metric tonnes in 2025/26. This has made it much easier for brands and retailers to secure reliable volumes of certified tuna.

Thirdly, the growth in certified supply closed the gaps that had previously made full retailer commitment challenging. Many of the practical supply chain challenges that existed a decade ago around availability, traceability, and sourcing consistency have steadily been addressed as more fisheries, processors, and traders have entered the program.

Finally, Australian retailers saw an opportunity to turn their sustainability commitments into tangible action. By switching their own-brand ranges and supporting certified brands, they demonstrated that doing the right thing for the ocean can also deliver strong consumer trust and category growth.

That's not a marginal decision. With an estimated 336 million servings of tuna consumed in Australia each year, making certified tuna the default means millions of households are now making a sustainable choice without even having to think about it.

In many ways, Australia shows what can happen when a pioneering brand, growing global supply, committed retailers and informed consumers all move in the same direction.

How significant is the role of major retailers, such as Coles Group, Woolworths Group, and ALDI, in driving sustainable seafood sourcing practices across the broader supply chain?

Retailers are arguably the most powerful lever in the entire sustainable seafood system. When a major retailer moves, the whole supply chain moves with it.

Coles, Woolworths and ALDI collectively account for the vast majority of grocery spending in Australia. When all three commit their home brand tuna ranges to MSC certification, they are resetting the baseline for what acceptable sourcing looks like across the entire category. Suppliers who want shelf space need to meet that bar.

The ripple effect extends well beyond Australian waters. Most canned tuna sold in Australia is imported, mainly from the Western and Central Pacific Ocean, the world's largest tuna resource. This means supermarket decisions in Australia directly influence fishing practices in international waters.

There is also a powerful signal sent to the broader market. When three competing retailers independently arrive at the same certification commitment, it signals to brands, suppliers and fisheries that this is not a passing trend. It is a structural shift in market expectations.

MSC-certified tuna fisheries have also demonstrated measurable improvement over time, with fisheries completing two full certification cycles showing performance gains across all three principles of stock health, ecosystem impact and management. Retailer demand is part of what drives that continuous improvement.

That rising tide lifts all boats!

Australian-owned brands like Walker's Tuna and Little Tuna benefit significantly when certification becomes the category norm. It levels the playing field, gives them a credible platform to compete on provenance and sustainability, and opens doors to retailers who are increasingly making certification a condition of ranging.

Ultimately, retailers have the scale to make sustainability the default rather than the premium. That is the most consequential thing they can do for our oceans.

What measurable environmental outcomes are expected from this transition, particularly for tuna stocks in the Western and Central Pacific Ocean?

The environmental outcomes of this transition are tangible and well-evidenced. 87 per cent of assessed tuna and tuna-like species stocks are now considered sustainably fished, and 99 per cent of global tuna landings come from those stocks, a remarkable turnaround driven by science-based management and international cooperation. That is the foundation on which Australia's retail commitment sits.

The Western and Central Pacific Ocean is the world's largest tuna resource and a primary source of canned tuna sold in Australia. When retailers commit to MSC-certified sourcing from these waters, they are directly incentivising fisheries to meet and maintain rigorous standards across stock health, ecosystem impact and fisheries management. In practical terms, when consumers choose MSC-certified tuna, they are doing the same thing.

Certification doesn't just verify sustainability at a point in time; it drives continuous improvement.

With 182 tuna fisheries now engaged in the MSC program globally, and 51.7 per cent of the global tuna catch MSC-certified, the scale of positive impact is significant. Every retailer's commitment to certified sourcing strengthens the economic case for fisheries to stay in the program and keep improving.

When sustainable tuna becomes the default on supermarket shelves, it sends a direct signal to the water that how fish are caught matters, and that the market will reward those who do it responsibly.

What challenges remain in moving Australia's canned tuna category toward 100 per cent independently certified sustainable sourcing?

Reaching 70 per cent MSC-certified canned tuna in Australia is a genuine milestone, but our work is never-ending.

The good news is that the major barriers that existed a decade ago, such as limited supply, traceability gaps and uncertainty around commercial viability, have largely been addressed. More than half of the world's wild tuna catch now comes from MSC-certified fisheries, giving brands and retailers access to substantial and reliable volumes of certified product.

The remaining challenge is largely one of commitment and timing. Some supply chains are still transitioning existing contracts, packaging and sourcing arrangements, while others are balancing certification against broader commercial considerations.

Some of these canned tuna brands are Australia's popular and trusted household names that consumers reach for week in, week out. Their participation would be significant, not just in volume terms, but in the message it would send to shoppers and to the fishing community globally.

We genuinely welcome and encourage them to take that step to support fisheries that have made a long-term commitment to responsible fishing, to have that commitment independently verified, and to let consumers know at the point of purchase that their choice matters. Every brand that chooses the label adds another voice to that story.

How are Australian consumers responding to the increased availability of MSC-certified products, and has sustainability become a stronger purchasing factor?

Australian consumers are not just aware of sustainable seafood, they are increasingly choosing it, and the data tells a compelling story of momentum building over time.

The 2024 GlobeScan survey, the largest of its kind, surveyed over 20,000 seafood consumers across 23 countries and showed that this consciousness is translating into action.

75 per cent of Australian seafood consumers believe that to save the ocean, we must consume fish and seafood only from sustainable sources. It is a striking figure that reflects how deeply environmental values are embedded in Australian food culture. With four out of five Australian households purchasing seafood regularly, consumers have a significant opportunity to make a tangible difference through their choices.

Almost half of consumers (48 per cent) said they are concerned about overfishing, and 27 per cent said they would eat more seafood in the future if they knew it wasn't harming the ocean. That is an enormous, unrealised opportunity for certified seafood.

What is particularly significant in the Australian context is the role that home brand certification plays in closing the values-action gap. When Coles, Woolworths and ALDI make certified tuna their default home-brand offering, sustainability is no longer a premium choice but becomes accessible, removing the price and complexity barriers that have historically slowed consumer uptake.

The next GlobeScan findings are to be released soon this year, and we anticipate they will reflect the significant market strides Australia has made.

Could Australia's retail-led transition serve as a model for other international markets?

Australia's retail-led transition is an encouraging and positive story. And a chapter in a much larger global movement.

Markets across Europe and North America have also played a major role in driving demand for certified sustainable tuna. The UK, Germany, the Netherlands and the United States have all seen significant commitments from retailers and brands, helping to create the global momentum we see today.

These are mature, high-volume markets that have been building certified seafood infrastructure for years. Australia's achievement is meaningful precisely because it demonstrates that a mid-sized market can move quickly and decisively when retailers, brands and suppliers align around a common commitment.

The MSC's mission is an inclusive global movement in which every market, regardless of size, geography, or development stage, has a pathway to participate. Australia's story is a benchmark to show what is possible.

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