

AN OPEN LETTER TO OCEAN ACTIVISTS AND MARINE CONSERVATION GROUPS

From the ASSOCIATION FOR PROFESSIONAL OBSERVERS

November 18, 2016

I read often about marine conservation groups calling for sustainability in commercial fisheries and stamping out illegal fishing. I wish to reach out for you all to join the Association for Professional Observers (APO) so that you might incorporate protections for observers into your position statements and the changes you are advocating from fishery management agencies. Please don't just call for more observer coverage. Work with us to understand what it means to the observers who provide that extra data and also the limitations that exist in electronic monitoring used to supplement observer coverage.

The APO also advocates for sustainable fisheries, but we focus on the details of what that requires because the devil is in the details - MSC certifications, Port State Measures, "Stamping out IUU Fishing", "conservation" measures - on the surface these names, statements and agreements appear to bring about positive change. But if you really want positive change, we need to look at who is collecting the data on these fisheries: What are the unique monitoring challenges to each fishery? What are the national labor standards for observers and how does each program match up? What are the objectives of the monitoring program? If compliance monitoring is not a part of a program's objectives, how does the agency ensure compliance? Is there robust oversight of the observer program managers and observer employers? What protections are in place for observers' safety and job security? How often are observers prevented from doing their jobs? Where are the harassment, interference, bribery, assault, injury and death trends and statistics reported? What is preventing this data and information from reaching the public? Would people eat tuna if they knew the observers who were monitoring its catch were being bribed, harassed and murdered and that those living were being muzzled?

Many observers are successful in collecting fisheries data and information and are skilled in avoiding interference with their duties, but without transparent reporting of the harassed, without addressing the conditions that cause interference, and without consequence to the perpetrators, a program cannot operate successfully and the veracity of the data cannot be trusted. Just last year our friend, colleague and a well-seasoned observer, Keith Davis, was reported missing at sea during his last Inter American Tropical Tuna Commission (IATTC) transshipment observer assignment. You may have heard of it. We believe he was murdered. As we believe another observer in Papua New Guinea, Wesley Tahlia, was murdered around the same time, under the jurisdiction of another Regional Fishery Management Organization (RFMO), the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC) and



yet another PNG observer, Charlie Lasisi, in 2010. None of these enter the official agency reports. In fact, at its 90th meeting, the IATTC reported that there were *no problems* in their transshipment observer program. This was after Keith disappeared. If a murdered or “disappeared” observer isn’t a problem, there is something very wrong with that agency. That is obvious to us and I hope to you also. Any claims of positive change or sustainability are a complete farce unless we protect the observers whose data allows us to gauge whether or not a fishery is sustainable. We must repeat this again and again until all understand it, including the consumer.

These acts are just the tip of the iceberg, we are hearing. They are extreme cases of an unreported problem facing the observers whose data is the base for all your organizations’ assessment of fisheries. Observer harassment, injury, critical job-related illnesses, bribery, interference, assault and death trends are not followed anywhere in the world. Yet broad assessments are made that a fishery is sustainable if it is MSC certified or has some other eco-label. This is a public deception. To us, these milestones are a complete farce because there are no observer protections embedded in the requirements of any eco - certification. Furthermore, they mean nothing without transparency of observer reports and continual public oversight.

Marine conservation groups need to engage the people who work alongside the fishermen, those who collect the data on the fish catch and bycatch, the violations, the illegal fishing, the bribery attempts, and the human trafficking that they are witnessing. These are reports that are not seeing the light of day because nobody demands transparency of this information. Many observers are not willing to talk openly about these cases because of the lack of job security. Yet observers regularly contact us about these issues. So, it is important for us to work together to change the management of observer programs and the national and international laws to protect observer safety and job security. APO is the only organization in the world that specifically advocates for observer protections. It is difficult for us to bring about protections for observers without your collective support. We are a small all-volunteer 501(c) (5) non-profit, non- governmental organization and thus are limited in staff and funding.

I urge you all to consider this – please include the need for observer protections and transparency of observer data and information in your statements, on your websites, in your demands and to work with the APO in bringing about effective monitoring programs, not just an illusion of fisheries monitoring and sustainable fishing practices.

Thank you,

Elizabeth Mitchell

Association for Professional Observers

