



Discourses, risk perceptions and the “green” profile of the New Zealand salmon farming industry

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Discourse
Risk perception
Narratives
Salmon farming industry
New Zealand

ABSTRACT

The New Zealand salmon farming industry is building its salmon farming brand on a green image of a clean industry, operating in pristine environments and thus producing a high-quality premium product. The paper pursues the discursive dynamics behind this green profile by investigating how different stakeholders reveal industry related risk perceptions in claims and narratives. Completing this it is demonstrated that the risk perceptions are strongly linked to an environmental discourse, but also that the particular risk society behind this is set under pressure by current ambitions of industrial expansion

1. Introduction

The New Zealand salmon farming industry has been acknowledged to have a “green” profile, indicated by its top ranking on the Global Aquaculture Performance Index (GAPI) [1] and in the Global Salmon Initiative Sustainability Report on key environmental and social factors [2], and by its sustainability commendation by the US consumer guide *Seafood Watch* [3]. The aim of this paper is to explore the dynamics behind this green profile in particular by examining the influence of the regulatory regime and risk perceptions on practices in the industry. To accomplish this, the article draws on the concepts of *modern risk society*, *discourse*, *stakeholders* and *corporate social responsibility* (CSR). According to the risk society thesis, a distinctive feature of modern industrial societies is an underlying fear of the perceived risks created by the duality of science and an expert-based industrial production system [4,5]. To follow up, the article asks what the relationship is between stakeholders’ risk perceptions and the green profile of New Zealand salmon farming. To discuss this question, the discourses, related narratives and claims that characterize the salmon industry in New Zealand are scrutinized. A strong concern for environmental risks across stakeholder positions directs the industry towards a green profile, but currently this is under pressure from new regulations, a stronger emphasis on the social responsibility of firms and the growth ambitions of industry actors.

2. Risk society, discourse, stakeholders and CSR

The theory of the modern risk society is that the process of

industrialization has produced new and invisible risks as a by-product of its overarching goal of wealth creation and increased use of science [4,5]. Because of the invisible nature of risks, risk mapping is often seen as being within the domains of scientific experts and public regulatory bodies. Nevertheless, as science increasingly fails to foresee, prevent and address risks, its knowledge monopoly is deteriorating, and new groups such as the media and nongovernment organizations (NGOs) have gained power in the struggle to define risk [6]. Accordingly, an understanding of the dynamics of risk perception, requires an understanding of the discourses and reflexive processes in which stakeholders participate. In addition, in the wake of the new challenges in the modern risk society, there has been a growing interest in academic research and in society in how stakeholders pressure businesses to adopt CSR strategies. This focus on stakeholders and CSR has developed partly because of increased attention to environmental and health risks from consumers and society at large, which is related to an increased awareness of corporate production standards and corporate management strategies [7].

First, the concept of discourse is considered. Foucault [8] views discourse as the fundamental structure of the world, and believes that it constitutes the basis for all social practice, whereas Fairclough [9] and Laclau and Mouffe [10] stress discourse analysis and the practices of “articulation” of claims, as they see these as attempts to fix meaning in political struggles. Our approach draws less on Foucault and more on Laclau and Mouffe, and Fairclough. Yet to capture the interest of stakeholders in industry development, it is useful to supplement the concept of articulation of claims with the concept of narratives. Discourse is defined as the process of producing meaning on a certain

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topic in a way that inherently structures the perceptions and practices of the participants, who do not necessarily have conscious knowledge of being controlled [11], while narratives are defined as the specific perceptions or modes of explanations promoted by an actor or group of actors located in a certain discourse [12,13]. The argument for introducing narratives into the analysis is that this provides us with a reflexive tool intermediating between “unconscious” discourses and “spontaneous” claims.

In our discourse–narrative–claim setting, the article considers the topic of the green profile of New Zealand salmon farming and related discourses, and examine how risk perception and the claims of various stakeholders are linked to its development. Accordingly, the concept of stakeholders is key for us. Freeman [14] defined a stakeholder as “any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the organization’s objectives.” This definition is applied when identifying and categorizing groups of stakeholders who have an interest in influencing the development of the industry. This is a significant task in this analysis because it is crucial to have a clear idea of whom the relevant stakeholders represent when identifying patterns of risk perception. In our setting, the various industrial, governmental and civil actors involved in the discourse represent three crucial stakeholder groups. By mapping the narratives and claims of the stakeholders, the risks are outlined as they perceive them.

Finally, to describe how industries respond to the narratives and claims of stakeholders, the concept of CSR is introduced. The main idea of CSR is that businesses have a responsibility to the parts of society and natural environments that are affected by their practices and strategies [15]. Jones [16] describes CSR as “the notion that corporations have an obligation to constituent groups in society other than stockholders and beyond that prescribed by law or union contract, indicating that a stake may go beyond mere ownership.” This can be seen as an early connection between CSR and the stakeholder literature. This connection has been made by more recent researchers, who argue that CSR incorporated into management strategies is a means for companies to respond to social, environmental and other discourses in society [17]. Thus, in addition to participating directly with (counter)narratives and claims in discourses, industry stakeholders can participate in and respond to discourses through CSR strategies [18]. The analysis is especially concerned with linking the CSR dimension to firms’ social obligations for local development.

In the sections below, the article outline how regulations and discourses in terms of the narratives and claims of stakeholders relate to the green profile development of the New Zealand salmon farming industry. It is argued that an industry’s willingness to participate in relevant discourses and its willingness to recognize the narratives and claims that governmental and civil stakeholders deem relevant demarcate the influence of stakeholders on an industry. Hence, in the analyze below it is demonstrated how a modern risk society in terms of discourses, narratives and claims of stakeholders relates to the (counter)narratives and claims of the industry. The analysis begins by charting the historical development and political regulation that characterizes the industry.

3. The protective approach of the New Zealand salmon industry

The salmon industry in New Zealand is a relatively new industry based on Chinook salmon (also known as “quinnat” or “king salmon”) brought to New Zealand from California at the beginning of the 20th century [19]. Because salmon are not native to New Zealand, and there are very few established salmon runs in New Zealand river systems, the salmon farming industry is not in conflict with wild salmon stocks. In its initial phase (1960–1970), the industry operated in fresh water locations, while the first marine cage rearing began around 1980 as an experimental farm run by British Petroleum on Stewart Island. In 1983, a change in legislation allowed marine farms to operate, and by

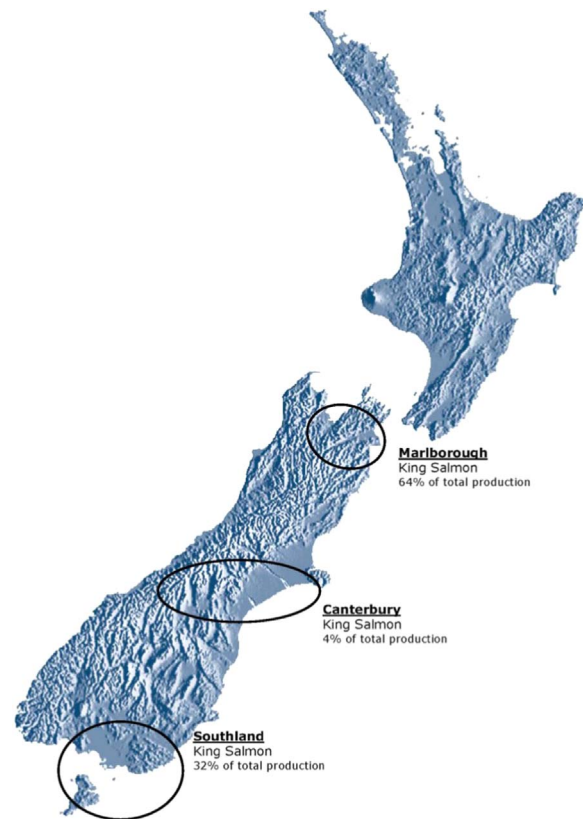


Fig. 1. Location of salmon production in New Zealand.

Source: <http://www.salmon.org.nz/new-zealand-salmon-farming/farming-regions/> accessed 18.11.2015.

1989 Stewart Island had become the major center for salmon farming, followed by the Marlborough Sounds and Akaroa Harbor (see Fig. 1). In the 1990s, the industry continued to grow, but its growth slowed in the 2000s when a new system of legislation was developed and implemented. Along with these changes, the industry underwent restructuring. During the past decade, the number of firms operating marine farms has been reduced to three, while three firms operate in freshwater locations. All production is on a relatively small scale compared with the world’s largest salmon farming countries, where large international companies dominate the industry. The marine farms have a 90% share and the fresh water producers a 10% share of the yearly production of approximately 11,000 t [20]. Marine production is dominated by King Salmon, which operates five farms in the Marlborough Sounds (64% of marine production). Sanford Ltd. has two farms in Southland (32% of marine production), while Akaroa Salmon operates one farm in the Canterbury region (4% of marine production). Finally, the freshwater producers include three farms in Twizel run by Mt Cook Alpine Salmon, High Country Salmon and Aoraki Smokehouse (Fig. 1).

Since the early 2000 s, the growth in the industry has been remarkably relaxed compared with that in salmon farming regions elsewhere [21–23], and only a handful of new licenses have been granted. In particular, changes in the regulatory regime in New Zealand have slowed growth. In 1991, the New Zealand government passed the Resource Management Act (RMA). This introduced a dual consent process for new aquaculture farms, whereby marine farmers first had to apply for a coastal permit from the relevant regional district council before applying for a fisheries permit from the Ministry of Fisheries [24]. During the 1990s, the aquaculture industry grew rapidly. There was a steady increase in new farm locations as many applications were approved [25]. This changed in 2001, when a moratorium on new applications was announced by the government. This lasted from

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