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Series 'Fish welfare as a business' #3

Critical comments on Blueyou's animal welfare programme



ANIMAL WELFARE

A live worth living

Blueyou recognizes the integral role of animal welfare and health in sustainable food production. We are committed to improving the conditions of species raised and caught in our supply chains and origins, knowing that we are nowhere yet.

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What do you expect when you see a product with an 'animal welfare' sticker? That the animal had a 'life worth living', right? This is what the Swiss company Blueyou is aiming for, a very high goal, and they are at least humble enough to admit that they are 'nowhere yet'. And who is, in seafood? Is it feasible, at all? Let's see.

The company Blueyou was founded in 2004 by two former sourcing specialists for animal products for one of the major Swiss retail chains. Blueyou sources fish from aquaculture and fisheries all over the world, paying attention to environmental and social issues. The small company also runs its own projects in developing countries. At the end of 2023, Blueyou has launched an ambitious programme to meet also the growing demand for fish welfare [1].

To do so, Blueyou sought advice from the US based Aquatic Life Institute (ALI), which since its recent foundation in 2019 has distinguished itself by behaving as if it was an overarching organisation to embrace the numerous initiatives, projects and

research into fish welfare. The criteria that ALI wants to have evaluated in aquaculture are numerous and wordy [2]; however, as with all similar endeavours, there is no assessment of the fundamental suitability of a species to experience welfare in captivity. This is also reflected in the Blueyou programme, as is the fact that ALI has not yet developed criteria for fisheries.

It is hard to understand why an established company with a record of achievements in responsible sourcing would count on a freeloader in the fish welfare scene, but that's the way it is, fish welfare as a business.

A review of Blueyou's requirements and objectives

The good thing about Blueyou's ambitious programme is that it not only describes the intentions but also the deadlines. On this basis [1], we can make a rough feasibility check.

Table 1				
	Blueyou Deadline*	Blueyou Requirements in aquaculture [a]	think.fish Feasibility check [b]	
1	Dec 2028	70% of aquaculture origins are nature-based systems with no external feed; animals live in their natural habitat.	As table 2 shows, Blueyou would have to change all its aquaculture origins, with the questionable exception of Black tiger prawns from extensive mangrove ponds.	
2	Dec 2026	Launch of five new origins of low trophic seafood species.	This might be a key to achieve requirement 1, however, high welfare potential is limited to only 2 species, Nile tilapia and African catfish, according to [b]	
3	Dec 2028	100% of farmed species raised in species- and site-specific stocking density.	The farmed species in table 2 can hardly be kept in species-appropriate densities for commercial purposes, according to the species' needs in [b]	
4	Dec 2024	No mutilation of farmed animals.	Mutilation is mainly eyestalk ablation in female shrimps, feasible to end it, though sportive deadline.	
5	Dec 2025	100% of farmed finfish stunned by electrocution.	For the farmed finfish species in table 2, this is generally feasible, but maybe not for all within deadline.	
6	Dec 2026	100% of farm-raised crabs stunned and killed by electrocution.	Stunning and killing of shrimps is still and by far the exception, all the more by electrocution (developed for bigger decapods). Very ambitious goal.	
	Blueyou Deadline*	Blueyou Requirements in fisheries [a]	think.fish Feasibility check [c]	
7	Dec 2025	Assess the status and performance of catch and handling practices in Blueyou projects and programs.	According to table 2, decisive reduction of animal suffering is feasible in only in 2, maybe 3 current Blueyou fisheries.	?
8	Dec 2026	Initiation of 3 pilot programs for improved stunning and killing practices in 3 important Blueyou origins.	Improved stunning and killing is only one part in the reduction of the suffering, and especially in industrial fisheries the suffering from the catch until stunning can be much more important.	?
[a] https://blueyou.com/uploads/Policies/BY-Policy-Animal-Welfare.pdf [b] https://fair-fish-database.net [c] https://fishtest.net				

Table 1 is a summary of what Blueyou describes as requirements and objectives, arranged in their order, complemented by an evaluation of the feasibility and a traffic-light rating in the last two columns, based on the groundwork done by fair-fish.

Table 2 lists all current species in the Blueyou range, organised into four groups: wild fishes, farmed fishes, wild mussels, and farmed shrimps. To illustrate the range of Blueyou's sourcing criteria, the table summarises the self-assessment of Blueyou's commitment not only to animal welfare, but also to environmental and social welfare, as declared in the 'Ocean Impact Tracker' for each product [3]. In the last column (P**), we rate — again based on fair-fish's groundwork — the suitability of the species to feel well in farming or the suitability of the fishing method to significantly reduce animal suffering.

The ambitious plan is largely unfeasible in the existing farms...

Table 1 and **table 2** make it clear: only 2, at the very most 3 of Blueyou's 6 requirements are feasible: to electrically stun all farmed fishes (and at best all farmed shrimps) and to refrain from eyestalk ablation in female shrimps to boost fertility. The deadlines for these requirements are very ambitious, if not out of reach.

The other 3 requirements which are important not only in a single event, but throughout the whole live of the animals, turn out to be unfeasible if we apply the results of the research carried out by fair-fish.

Conclusion: the programme may lead to less suffering in aquaculture, but certainly not to animal welfare.

... and not feasible in most existing fisheries

The 2 requirements listed in **table 1** are merely preparatory steps. To check the feasibility of the plan, we need to look at **table 2** and there to the fishing methods in the 'production' column. If 'welfare' is a euphemism in any kind of fisheries, there is at least the possibility — depending on the gear and method — to reduce animal suffering, i.e. the entire duration from capture to stunning and death, as well as the extent of stress, injuries, and pain.

The aim of any serious 'animal welfare' initiative in fisheries must be to significantly reduce all the above-mentioned suffering factors. Looking at the fishing methods currently applied on finfish for Blueyou, it is hard to imagine how this goal can be achieved with trawls and longlines, and there remain practical issues with pole & line for stunning and killing immediately after the catch has been catapulted on board. There is true potential to achieve the goal however with single hook line and in some cases manual beach net.

As to the mussel fisheries, there is still a lack of research on animal suffering, and therefore no 'humane' slaughter protocol is available. If it were, we can assume that

Table 2		Blueyou products			Assessment			
Species (25)		Production	Origin	Label	H*	S*	A*	P**
farmed fish	Alaska pollock	midwater trawl	Bering Sea, Gulf of Alaska (FAO 67)	MSC				–
	Atlantic cod	Demersal Longline	Barents Sea (FAO 27)	MSC				–
	Sockeye Salmon	Manual beach net	Wood River, Bristol Bay(FAO 67)	–				+
	Yellowfin tuna	single hook handline	North-Sulawesi (FAO 71)	MSC				+
	Skipjack Tuna	Pole & line	Maldives (FAO 51)	FT+MSC				(+)
wild fish	European seabass	net cage	Turkey	ASC				–
	Gilthead seabream	net cage	Turkey	ASC	?	?	?	–
	Atlantic Salmon	net cage	Norway	Bio				–
	Atlantic Salmon	net cage	Norway	–				–
	Barramundi	net cage	Vietnam	FT+ASC				–
wild mussels	Roe's Abalone	Diving & hand gathering	Flinders Bay (FAO 57)	MSC				?
	Green Lip Abalone	Diving & hand gathering	Flinders Bay (FAO 57)	MSC				?
	Hard Shell Clams	Hand Gathering	Mekong River Delta (FAO 71)	–				?
	Japanese Scallop	Mechanized Dredge	Sea of Okhotsk (FAO 61)	MSC				–
farmed shrimps	Pacific White Shrimp	Intensive pond	Vietnam	–				–
	Black Tiger Shrimp	Integr. mangrove pond	Vietnam	Bio/ASC	?			?

* Blueyou self-assessment of production impacts on:

H = habitat + climate — S = social welfare — A = animal welfare

■ high impact in at least 1 criterion

■ medium impact in at least 1 criterion, no high impact in any criterion

■ low impact in all criteria

** think.fish evaluation of the potential of welfare in captivity [b]
resp. of the potential to reduce the suffering in fisheries [c]

– low potential

+ high potential (+) maybe

? in question

[b] based on fair-fish-database.net

[c] based on fishtest.net

hand gathering of mussels could have a high potential to reduce the suffering, whereas this potential seems rather low in the case of dredging.

Conclusion: Animal suffering can be significantly reduced in 1 to 2 of the existing fisheries, in all other fisheries this is unlikely.

What Blueyou could do

As a company that has a responsibility to its employees, suppliers, and customers, Blueyou cannot simply do without almost all its sources at once. However, if a programme including real animal welfare is planned, Blueyou could

- focus on the few current sources with high potential of animal welfare resp. reduction of animal suffering,
- develop new sources with high potential,
- continue the low-potential sources for a certain transitional period, and

- initially reduce the programme to some of the products and then gradually add products to the programme.

In this way, Blueyou could aim high and remain realistic at the same time, thus paving the way for other pioneering companies.

Sources and links:

[1] [Blueyou animal welfare policy](#)

[2] [ALI recommendations for aquaculture certification](#)

[3] see example: [European seabass](#)