Social licensing at seaweed farm sites

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Content

• What is social license to operate?
• Components of social license to operate
• Why does social license matter for aquaculture?
• What do site-scale stakeholders think of seaweed cultivation?
• Legitimacy, trust, and consent
• Is social license to operate relevant for seaweed cultivation in the EU?
What is social license to operate?

Industry-coined term used to describe the relationships that industries have with communities.

Can empower communities to seek benefits from industries that have social and environmental costs.

These costs can include the use of space, environmental and visual degradation, and disruptions to normal social life.

Provides a framework for industries to go beyond legal compliance with environmental and social regulations.
Components of social license to operate

✓ Understanding the social context of the area
✓ Trust and trust worthiness
✓ Quality contact and engagement
✓ Communication
✓ Procedural fairness
✓ Relationship-building
✓ Visual and environmental impact
✓ Maintaining social order

Example of a grass-roots campaign against an extractive industry; kelp dredging. Source: Change.org 2019
Why does social license matter for aquaculture?

Lack of social license can result in:

- Increasing costs of operations
  - Planning and permitting can take longer
  - Risk of sabotage
  - Risk of litigation
  - Damage to reputation
- Decrease in access to sea space
- Increase in formal regulation
- Can cause and unpleasant work/living environment for those involved

Protest against 250ha seaweed farm Trénez, Nantes, 2015.
Does social license apply to seaweed cultivation?

Task 6.4.1 Work with local communities at test sites to identify means for achieving social license for development of seaweed aquaculture

Cultivation site social contexts (industry survey – 5 countries) → Industry workshops x4 → Local surveys and interviews (40 interviews across 5 countries)
What do stakeholders think of seaweed cultivation in France?

▪ Small scale is acceptable, in all three areas to all stakeholders.

▪ Large-scale is less acceptable to community groups and NGOs

▪ Social and environmental concerns

▪ Perceptions of bias in science and regulation – lack of trust in licensing procedures

▪ Blue Growth Agenda may not “fit” with community aims.

“Until recently there were not too many problems with social acceptability because we cultivated on smaller spaces... 3-4 hectares is fine but 100-150 is impossible.”
What do stakeholders think of seaweed cultivation in Scotland?

- Desire for locally-owned and run farms and facilities
- Lack of information on what seaweed cultivation could mean for Scotland
- Regulatory regime needs development
- Social and environmental sustainability prerequisites for acceptance

“I need reassurance that seaweed farming is not harmful to the marine environment”
Producer opinions and actions on social license for seaweed cultivation

✓ Representation from large to small cultivation organisations, both commercial and experimental
✓ All recognise the importance of aspects of SLO, and most were practicing but most had not heard of the term itself

“creating awareness...about seaweed farming avoids misinformation which can be harmful to the sector”

From left to right: the type of information that seaweed cultivation companies have developed, the purpose of its use, the target audience, and self-reported recognition of links with social license theory.
Legitimacy, trust and consent in developing relationships with stakeholders

✓ **Legitimacy**: balancing the economic viability of the industry with perceptions of what constitutes a socially acceptable and environmentally sustainable industry.
  ✓ Scotland: a diffused model
  ✓ France: small-scale with improved information provision

✓ **Trust**: the people/organisations providing information and engaging with stakeholders can be more important than the information itself
  ✓ Deliberative knowledge production
  ✓ Media plays a significant role where relationships are poor

✓ **Consent**: difficulty of raising concerns with large corporations/businesses
  ✓ Accountability and scale
  ✓ Effective communication

“I don’t say that we are “all good” and that they are “all wrong”. We must link and gather points of view that are far apart. We are in a logic of co-construction, sharing of decisions and uses, but for this to work, it is necessary that people admit that we can share and therefore [have] discussions.”
Is social license relevant for seaweed aquaculture in the EU?

✓ Social license to operate could be useful to the seaweed cultivation industry as it expands – Smaller-sale seaweed cultivation organisations are already practicing activities that are associated with gaining social license to operate

✓ Clearly define seaweed industry terms – to alleviate confusion in understanding between harvesting and cultivation

✓ Provide transparent information on environmental impacts – the good and the bad

✓ Be aware of ad hominem arguments – contextual understanding, situational awareness and empathy are key to reducing the impacts of these types of arguments

✓ Develop good relationships – coming to a shared consensus is not always feasible, being available to listen, showing empathy and communicating well can reduce conflict
Huge thank you to all of the people who took part in this study. It would not have been possible without your expertise, opinions and time.

Free resources (including more details on this study): Handbook on Best Practices for Seaweed Cultivation – coming in 2021 – see www.genialgproject.eu for updates

Paper pre-print available: Billing et al (2020) Is social license to operate relevant for seaweed cultivation in Europe? Aquaculture, send me an email or a message on ResearchGate (Suzannah-Lynn Billing). Tell us what you think!

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