

Olympic springboard to a sustainable legacy

By Jason Holland, SeafoodSource contributing editor reporting from London, England

21 September, 2012

Two weeks have passed since the cauldron, designed by Thomas Heatherwick to house the Olympic flame, was extinguished at the 2012 Paralympic Games and it's already been more than a month since Lithuanian Laura Asadauskaite won the last gold of the Olympic Games for her endeavors in the modern pentathlon. For six enthralling weeks, the sporting drama of London 2012 was the hot topic — at the school gate, the water cooler, the bus stop, everywhere.

Physical excellence is one thing but the Games were sold on the promise of a creating lasting legacy. Part of this pledge came through the “London 2012 Food Vision,” unveiled by the London Organizing Committee of the 2012 Olympic and Paralympic Games (LOCOG) in 2009, which included the commitment that all fish and shellfish served had to be demonstrably sustainable by adhering to the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organization's (FAO) Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries as well as strict Illegal Unreported and Unregulated Fishing (IUU) regulations.

Caterers also had to be sure of fisheries' sustainability status and species' seasonality to avoid spawning seasons. They were further told they should be diverse in their selection of raw materials.

These sourcing regulations were a first for a major international event and were met with considerable anxiety and skepticism from caterers: London 2012 was after all being billed as the largest peacetime event ever organized in Britain and even without LOCOG's green vision it was sure to put considerable strain on resources.

Nevertheless, over a total of 27 days of sporting action, an estimated 14 million meals were consumed at the various Olympic venues, including 1.2 million meals by the athletes, and every seafood product used — an estimated 100 metric tons — was assessed by LOCOG and confirmed as being sustainable.

The 2012 Games are now being hailed as something of a game-changer for seafood supplies for the country as a whole as many foodservice companies have since pledged to continue their commitment to sustainable fish procurement.

In the “Sustainable Fish Legacy” report, published by the Sustainable Fish City campaign, which is operated by Sustain, the non-profit advocacy group for better food and farming, Lord Sebastian Coe, LOCOG chair, said he was proud the Games had inspired such wholesale change.

“I understand that already, caterers serving over 100 million meals a year have promised to buy fish sustainably, adopting our London 2012 fish standard,” said Coe. “This is a great London 2012 legacy – sustainable jobs in the industry underpinned by the best fish buying standards that will support fisheries and precious marine environments long into the future.”

To ensure the momentum of the Food Vision doesn't slip, the Sustainable Fish City campaign, which was launched last year to transform the way fish is bought and sold in London, wants the city's stores, fish suppliers, restaurants, caterers, schools and tourist attractions to follow the Games' policy of only serving or supplying sustainable fish.

Like the Games, the campaign has caught the imagination, but of seafood buyers. Sustainable Fish City coordinator Jon Walker told SeafoodSource that to date, commitments to use sustainable fish had come from the U.K. government, the armed forces, the prison service and London Metropolitan Police, as well as the catering giants Sodexo, BaxterStorey, ISS Food and Hospitality and Restaurant Associates, and also blue-chip businesses that commission or provide large volumes of catering like British Airways and Coca-Cola GB.

“There are some great names and I’d like to get many more onboard; they’re companies that set the scene by specifying their needs to caterers. They are rewarding caterers that are already doing good work and they are encouraging other caterers to do the same,” said Walker.

He explained that Coca Cola GB has reviewed all the fish it was being sold after learning that 85 percent of its supply appeared on the Marine Conservation Society’s (MCS) amber list, which the NGO describes as being from “fisheries that are at risk of becoming unsustainable due to environmental, management or stock issues.”

The drinks giant now has Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Chain of Custody at its site and all the fish it buys are from the MCS green list and are MSC-certified.

“That’s the customer saying ‘this is what we want to do,’” said Walker. “London 2012 and the Food Vision proved the customer can make the catering industry change its ways by putting specifications in contracts.”

Some contract caterers haven’t waited for post-Games instruction and have taken it upon themselves to extend their commitment to sustainable fish procurement. Walker said BaxterStorey, which catered for the world’s media at London 2012, has now committed itself to MSC Chain of Custody and is almost entirely sourcing from the green list. Sodexo has established a similar policy, he said.

There’s still considerable ground to cover though and Walker feels there are too many big enterprises that are only making sustainable fish sourcing commitments at the most basic level of taking out red list fish.

“It’s great that they are doing that, but it’s only really a bit of the journey. They need to start supporting and promoting sustainable fisheries,” he said.

Looking ahead, the Sustainable Fish City ambition is not just confined to London, wheels are in motion for other U.K. metropolises to follow suit and Sustain is also looking to take the model into mainland Europe. Further down the line, Walker would also like to see the campaign replicated in the United States.

But in the meantime, he points to the challenge of ensuring LOCOG-style catering programs for the next wave of major international sporting events coming to U.K. arenas, events such as the 2014 Commonwealth Games, the 2015 Rugby World Cup and the 2017 World Athletic Championships.

“The Olympic Games set the bar; now we need to do even better,” he said.