Marine Sustainability: Investing in the Antarctic

In 2015, krill oil ingredients supplier Aker BioMarine (Oslo, Norway), together with scientists, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF), and the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), founded the Antarctic Wildlife Research Fund (AWR). This fund is designed to facilitate and promote research on the Antarctic ecosystem. For Aker BioMarine, the initiative is a key way to ensure that the company’s krill oil business operates sustainably and responsibly while protecting the Antarctic ecosystem. This October, the company announced that it is supporting AWR with an additional USD $1 million in funding over the next five years.

"It is important for us to support krill-related research in order to protect the Antarctic krill biomass and its surrounding ecosystem," said Mats Johansen, CEO, Aker BioMarine, in a press release announcing news of the funding. “We need to have the science and data available to make educated decisions on how to take the best care of the ecosystem in which we work to safeguard the future of the Antarctic fishery.”

Since its inception in 2015, AWR has funded numerous research projects, including three in 2017. One study, for instance, examined how the foraging behavior of humpback whales relates to krill catches in the Antarctic. Aker has helped to fund AWR since its inception. Other commercial supporters include dietary supplement firms such as Dr. Mercola, Blue BioTech International GmbH, Ridley Corp., BioMar, Floral, and Swisse Wellness.

Nutritional Outlook recently spoke to Cilia Holmes Indahl, Aker BioMarine’s director of sustainability, about AWR’s near-term goals for the coming year.

Nutritional Outlook: What are the biggest challenges around krill sustainability today?

Cilia Holmes Indahl: Antarctic krill is an essential food source for many Antarctic wildlife species, such as whales, seals, and penguins. It is therefore crucial that the krill biomass remain at a sustainable level to maintain the marine ecosystems balance. Krill has the largest biomass on earth, with 60.3 million metric tons of krill. While the quota of allowable catch is less than 1% of this biomass, in reality, only less than 0.3% of the biomass is actually being fished. Krill harvesting is therefore carried out at a responsible and sustainable level in respect to the Antarctic ecosystem.

Although the krill fishery is managed at sustainable levels today, it is important to continue research to better understand krill and the interlinkages between species in the Antarctic ecosystem. There are, for example, many potential challenges [such] as those imposed by global warming. There are insecurities about how climate change and its [rise of] ocean temperatures will affect the krill’s behavior, movements, and reproduction. Continued Antarctic wildlife research, such as the research the Antarctic Wildlife Research Fund (AWR) is funding, is crucial to monitor these potential challenges.

What have been the Antarctic Wildlife Research Fund’s biggest accomplishments since it launched in February 2015?

Indahl: The AWR fund has already had many milestones in its two first years. Most importantly, the fund has granted funds to five research projects. Three of those research projects are coming to their end and have already given new interesting knowledge about the wildlife in Antarctica.

To mention one example, Dr. Raouf Kilada and his research team developed a methodology to determine the age of krill based on studying krill’s eyes. Whereas in the past, determining the krill’s age was impossible, now, thanks to Kilada’s research, krill fisheries can estimate the age of the krill and thus improve their knowledge of the biomass.

Another accomplishment is the wide range of support from commercial partners. The commercial partnerships are essential to fund the research and also to set an example and sustainability standard for companies who base their businesses on marine resources. It is part of their responsibility not only to harvest sustainably, but to take care of the future of the ecosystem where their marine ingredients are harvested. Together with our customers, Aker BioMarine is proud to be leading the way on science-based sustainability and hopes that this will be the way forward—that all companies who depend on the biodiversity in the oceans contribute to research that ensures the health of the oceans.

We are also proud of and grateful for the continued support and good relationship we have with the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition (ASOC), both founding partners of AWR and part of the AWR Board. It is very important for AWR to work in collaboration with environmental NGOs who have long experience with safeguarding the Antarctic ecosystem. We are also grateful to the Science Advisory Group that gives their input to the AWR on where we need more research and what research projects deserve funding. Having the scientists on board ensures a high level of credibility, and we are experiencing a very high quality in the project proposals that are submitted.

Working cross-sectoral and pairing responsible business with environmental NGOs and scientists is a new way of working in the Antarctic and has resulted in a bigger impact than if any of the actors would have taken the initiative on their own. When you are working towards solving global challenges and the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a company, working together with your key stakeholders are essential to moving things forward.

In 2017 specifically, what milestones or achievements has AWR seen?

Indahl: The third round of call for research proposals in 2017 was very successful, with eight proposals. This continued, strong interest from researchers demonstrates that there is still a lot we do not know about the Antarctic ecosystem and confirms the relevance of AWR.
One recent and important milestone is the aforementioned renewed financial commitment from Aker BioMarine to AWR, which was announced at the EU’s Our Ocean Conference, to support AWR with USD $1 million over the next five years. The grant will further AWR’s work on promoting and facilitating research on the Antarctic ecosystem.

What are the biggest goals and areas of study for AWR for the rest of 2017 and going into 2018?

Indahl: Every invitation to apply for funds details the current priorities of the fund. The current priorities for the last call in 2017 can be found at www.antarcticfund.org/call-for-proposals-2017/. We have not set the new priorities for the 2018 calls yet; they will be launched when we open the fourth call for proposals in March 2018. The deadline for submitting research proposals is mid-June 2018. The board decides on research projects to receive grants in September.

Please describe how AWR and the Convention on the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources (CCAMLR) continue to work together.

Indahl: AWR and CCAMLR have continuously been working closely since the fund’s creation in 2015. Already in the early creation process, AWR developed the Scientific Research Plan in collaboration with CCAMLR to ensure a high quality of research. This led to the first aim of the Scientific Research Plan, which was to “contribute to CCAMLR’s work on the development of a feedback management for the commercial fishery for Antarctic krill.”

How have the key learnings of AWR so far impacted the way that Aker BioMarine does business?

Indahl: Our principle has always been: the more we know, the better. Both the projects on how age of krill can be determined and how the humpback whales move during their forage area will impact how we operate. More importantly, it is the idea of bringing all the findings together so that we can better understand the interdependencies of the species in the Antarctic and have better estimates for both the biomass of krill and the needs of predator species.

Today, it [has been determined] that the species depending on krill as a food source require approximately 50% of the biomass. Today, the fishery harvest is 0.3% of the biomass, meaning that there is an excess amount to ensure the wellbeing of the ecosystem.

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