

## Eco-label provides better protection for fish stocks than does the WTO

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**The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a foundation dedicated to maintaining the health and viability of our oceans, has more of an impact in the area of overfishing than all the agreements entered into by the World Trade Organisation (WTO), concludes dr. Peter Oosterveer of the Environmental Policy faculty group at Wageningen University in the December issue of *Ocean and Coastal Management*.**

There is a great need for global regulations according to the environmental sociologist, as globalisation is making it impossible for national governments or bodies such as the EU to regulate the fishing industry and the related fish processing and trading sectors. Oosterveer therefore compared the relative contributions by WTO regulations and by the MSC to stopping the global deterioration in the stocks of fish in the wild. In brief Oosterveer explains his findings in *Resource*, magazine for Wageningen University and Research Centre.

The WTO does not deal with the fishing industry itself – that is left to the discretion of national governments – but it does deal with the fish trade. WTO members are presently discussing the abolition of subsidies given by governments to their fishermen, as this leads to unfair competition. Fishing countries such as the USA and New Zealand as well as fishery experts such as Daniel Pauly support such a move, as subsidies encourage unprofitable fishing activities, according to Oosterveer. “But the negotiating parties have not yet agreed on how to deal with the smaller fishermen and on how much of an impact they have on the fish stocks.”

Although the abolition of subsidies can have a positive impact on fish stocks, Oosterveer does not have high expectations of the WTO as a global regulator. “Sustainability requirements play almost no role at all in the negotiations. Besides, they have been deadlocked for 2 years already. In addition, it's impossible to predict what kind of fishing agreements will eventually result. Fishing activities are only one element of the negotiations and can therefore be used as something to be given up in return for reaching agreement on the overall package.”

The MSC was established 11 years ago by Unilever, which was concerned about the availability of sufficient fish for its fish sticks, and by the Worldwide Fund for Nature, which was concerned about biodiversity. The result was a sustainability eco-label to distinguish fish which complies with the relevant requirements. By now, 3.5 million tons of fish foodstuff products, representing 7% of the global catch of fish and crustaceans, display this eco-label. Now that all Dutch supermarkets have agreed that, starting in 2011, they will sell only products displaying the MSC eco-label, this percentage will increase.

But MSC also has its limitations, explains Oosterveer. “The fish products concerned are sold primarily in wealthy countries in the northern hemisphere. This is because MSC enters into agreements with fishermen, traders and retailers throughout the chain. This requires the availability of sustainability indicators and supply chain management, which is a difficult issue in developing countries.” As it turns out, it proved difficult to enter into agreements with shrimp farmers in Southeast Asia. “A great many fish farmers are involved, and they work in very poor conditions. But it's not easy to take social circumstances into account within the framework of assigning the eco-label.”

Nevertheless, Oosterveer considers the type of approach illustrated by the MSC eco-label to be a promising one. “Compared to the WTO approach which ends up deadlocked on technical and political issues, this private initiative is a much more dynamic one.”

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#### More information

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