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Seafood certification raises questions

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Written by Robert Delfs
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Marine scientists say MSC fails to protect global fish stocks

Signs are that all is not well in the land of eco-labeling, especially when it comes to fish. Last month, Jennifer Jacquet and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia Fisheries Center and four other scientists published an opinion piece in *Nature* ("[Seafood stewardship in crisis](#),") claiming that the Marine Stewardship Council, the leading organization for certifying sustainable wild-capture fisheries, is "failing on its promise" to provide a label for sustainable products consumers can trust to "promote the best environmental choices in seafood."



New Zealand research vessel lands Antarctic toothfish.

Along with the Forest Stewardship Council, the Marine Stewardship Council is frequently cited as a successful example of cooperation between an environmental NGO and the private sector. Established in 1999 by the World Wildlife Fund and British-Dutch food giant Unilever, MSC became an independent non-profit organization in 1999. Nearly one in four adults in the USA, Canada, UK, Germany, France and Japan now recognize MSC's "blue check" eco-label, up from 9 percent in 2008, according to a study by AMR Marketing Research.

Jacquet and Pauly's criticism consists of five points:

1. The MSC's "third party" certification system creates potential conflicts of interest because lenient certifiers might expect to receive more work performing assessments and the required annual audits. Moreover, when objections are filed, the case is referred to an independent adjudicator whose role is not "to review the subject fishery against MSC principles and criteria but to determine whether the certification body made an error."
 2. The MCS re-certified the US trawl fishery for pollack in the Eastern Bering Sea, with an annual catch of 1 million tons, "despite the fact that the spawning biomass ... fell by 64 percent between 2004 and 2009." Jacquet and Pauly claim that similar declines have occurred in other MSC fisheries, including Pacific hake.
 3. In 2009, an MSC-accredited assessor recommended certification of Austral Fisheries' and Australian Longline's Heard and McDonald Islands (HIMI) fishery for the Antarctic toothfish. Little is known about the life cycle and biology of the toothfish, which is marketed as Chilean sea bass. Activists from the Antarctic and Southern Ocean Coalition, a Washington D.C. based environmental group, filed objections to the certification.
- Last week, however, the MSC announced that the HIMI toothfish fishery will enter the full assessment process. The assessment covers two longliners and a trawler responsible for an annual catch of more than 2,500 tons, which is primarily sold to markets in the US, Japan and China.
4. Last May, MSC certified the Antarctic krill fishery for Oslo-based Aker Biomarine, which harvested 8,600 tonnes of krill for the aquaculture market during the first half of 2010. Antarctic krill, a shrimp-like crustacean in the Southern Ocean and the Ross Sea, have estimated biomass of over 500 million tons. Krill are a major food source for whales, seals, penguins, squid and fish.

Although the stewardship council says less than 1 percent of krill stocks are currently under pressure, critics cite a 2004 paper in *Nature* showing that krill populations have been declining, possibly because of climate change — krill larvae feed on algae growing on the underside of sea ice, but the extent of sea ice coverage in the Antactic is rapidly diminishing. Total catch this season is expected to be 150-180,000 tons, an increase of about 40 percent over last year.

However, the most important issue, according to Jacquet and Pauly, is that most of the krill is intended for fishmeal to feed factory-farmed fish, pigs and chickens so it cannot be regarded as responsible or sustainable. The Washington DC based Pew Environment Group has objected to certification. However, current MSC assessment rules do not consider the end use of a product.

5. Jacquet and Pauly say MSC is biased toward larger, capital-intensive fisheries and neglects small-scale fisheries using selective, low-impact technologies such as hook-and-line fishing, which they claim make up only a tiny percentage of MSC certified fisheries. They note that for products such as coffee in the Fairtrade scheme,

"certification is available only to cooperatives of small producers; large plantations are not eligible." They also call for better representation from the developing world on MSC's board of directors.

Without reforms, Jacquet and Pauly conclude, the donor funds that currently go to support MSC would be better used "lobbying to eliminate harmful fisheries subsidies, or creating marine protected areas."

Last January, the WWF and the global management consulting company Accenture issued a report on seven fishery certification schemes against a set of WWF criteria focused on their effectiveness in addressing the health of fisheries and oceans. None of the seven seafood certification and eco-labelling schemes received a perfect score across all criteria, but the MSC received the highest weighted average score (95.63 percent), followed by Naturland (64.56 percent) and Milan-based Friend of the Sea (55.83 percent).

But Jacquet and Pauly are not MSC's only critics. Their own article notes that Greenpeace, the Pew Environment Group and some national branches of WWF have protested over various MSC procedures and certifications. Daniel Pauly is an expert on over-fishing and project leader of the Sea Around Us Project. He was an advisor to the MSC during its formation and has gone up against MSC before. In 2009, he accused the MSC of bending to pressure from the Walton Family Foundation and Wal-Mart to certify "reduction fisheries" that raise wild-capture fish in fish farms, feeding them ground-up fish.

MSC also came under criticism last January for certifying British Columbia's sockeye salmon fishery at a time when stocks in both the Fraser and Skeena Rivers were seen to be in serious decline, but Kerry Coughlin, MSC Regional Director for the Americas, defended the organization's approach, noting that the MSC process focuses on how a fishery is managed, not at how stocks and biomass vary from year to year. "The closure of all fishing in the Fraser last year was a sign of appropriate management," Coughlin explained. "In an unsustainable fishery, fishing would have been allowed to continue."

It is not unusual in the world of conservation and environmental work for the perfect to become the enemy of the merely good. Fisheries management is hardly an exact science, and it is unrealistic to expect that all well-managed fisheries run on sound principles of sustainability should be immune to downward fluctuations in biomass.

One can hope the MSC will seriously consider the points made by Jacquet and Pauly regarding potential conflicts of interest for assessors and— if there are excessive risks — take appropriate steps to minimize them. The assessment process for the Heard and MacDonald Islands Antarctic Toothfish fishery will clearly be an important test case.

The Convention for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, which governs Antarctic fishing, has classified this as an exploratory fishery and limited the take to a precautionary catch level of 3.47 million tons in the Atlantic-bordering sections of the Southern Ocean. The objective is to collect information needed to make it possible manage this fishery in the future, but some critics believe that the maximum annual limits should be reduced, particularly now that Norway is operating three ships and China is expected to rapidly increase its krill fishing fleet.

"If China starts fishing in a big way, catch will expand rapidly, outstripping our ability to orderly manage it," said Steve Nicol, a marine ecologist with the Australian Antarctic Division in Tasmania, quoted in Schiermeier's Nature News piece on Antarctic krill fishing cited above.

For MSC, the key question is not whether this fishery will be certified, but whether the assessment process will be open and comprehensive, taking into account of our so far limited understanding of these large, deep-water fish predators, and also whether the review will be seen as objective and reasonable by the fishing industry as well as conservationists, some of whom understandably view the toothfish as another Orange Roughy disaster in the making.

We can also look forward to the results of a detailed analysis of the environmental impacts that have resulted from the first ten years of MSC's fisheries certification programs that MSC has just commissioned fisheries consultancy IMRAG Ltd. to undertake MSC has just commissioned fisheries consultancy IMRAG Ltd.

But two of Jacquet and Pauly's criticisms seem less than reasonable. Both the practical implications and the ethics of using fish meal to feed domestic food animals are matters of contentious debate. MSC's mission and responsibility correctly focuses on "recognizing and rewarding sustainable fishing practices, influencing the choices people make when buying seafood, and working with our partners to transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis" It should not be distracted from this focus by being required to evaluate enduse issues, matters that should be addressed elsewhere.

Krill is used for direct human consumption in both Japan and Russia. Should the proportion of the end-products of a fishery that are used for direct human consumption be considered as criteria for sustainability?

The second questionable point relates to their charge that MSC assessments are biased against small-scale fisheries using low-impact techniques, and suggestion that MSC should copy Fair Trade's practice of restricting certification to cooperatives of small coffee producers.

MSC needs to provide access to small-scale artisanal fisheries and address the issue of costs for assessments and audits that effectively restrict smaller players, but without relaxing its sustainability criteria. But as long as exploitable fish stocks still remain anywhere in the world — and how long that will be is an open question — large-scale capital intensive fishing operations will continue to account for a large proportion of global wild capture fisheries. Suggesting that large-scale fisheries and fleets willing to operate responsibly and sustainably should be arbitrarily excluded from participating in the leading certification scheme isn't just missing the point — it would be utter folly.

Eliminating harmful subsidies to fisheries and creating more marine protected areas are both crucially important to halt or slow the rapid decline in world fish stocks. But helping consumers make responsible decisions about seafood consumption and supporting fisheries which practice sustainable management are also vital to achieving that goal. If there are weaknesses or problems with the MSC's assessment process, they should be fixed. But in the short span of ten years, the Marine Stewardship Council has made immense contributions to saving our oceans, and deserves our full support.

This is condensed from Robert Delfs' blog, [Images & Words](#).



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Asian CORRESPONDENT

Alice Poon

Why I Like Su Shi

Monday, 27 September 2010 | Alice Poon (潘慧嫻)

If I were to pick my idol Chinese poet, it would have to be Su Shi (蘇軾) of the Sung dynasty (宋朝) ("Sung" is the Cantonese pronunciation).

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