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Seafood stewardship questionable: UBC-Scripps experts

The world's most established fisheries certifier is failing on its promises as rapidly as it gains prominence, according the world's leading fisheries experts from the University of British Columbia (UBC), Scripps Institution of Oceanography at the University of California at San Diego and elsewhere.

Established in 1997 by the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, one of the world's largest fish retailers, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has been helping consumers eat fish "guilt-free" by certifying fisheries. Major North American grocery chains such as Wal-Mart, Whole Foods and Europe's Waitrose carry seafood bearing the blue-mark label as part of their sustainability strategy.

But in an opinion piece published in the current issue of *Nature*, six researchers from Canada, Italy and the U.S. object to the many of the MSC's procedures and certification of certain species.

"The MSC is supposed to be a solution, but a lot of what they do has turned against biology in favour of bureaucracy," says Jennifer Jacquet, lead author and post-doctoral fellow with UBC's Sea Around Us Project.

The largest MSC-certified fishery, with an annual catch of one million tonnes, is the U.S. trawl fishery for pollock in the eastern Bering Sea. It was certified in 2005 and recommended for recertification this summer.

"Pollock has been certified despite a 64 per cent decline of the population's spawning biomass between 2004 and 2009, with no solid evidence for recovery. This has worrisome implications for possible harmful impacts on other species and fisheries besides the viability of the pollock fishery itself," says Jeremy Jackson from Scripps Institution of Oceanography at UC San Diego. "How is that sustainable?"

Paul Dayton, also of Scripps Oceanography, and David Ainley, a biologist who works in the Antarctic, remain concerned about the recent certification of krill and the proposed certification of toothfish.

"The certification of the Ross Sea is an embarrassment as it flies in the face of existing data and denies any sense of precautionary management," says Dayton.

"We're especially concerned about the recent certification of Antarctic krill despite estimates of long-term decline and a link between krill population depletion and declining sea ice in areas sensitive to climate change," says Daniel Pauly, head of UBC's Sea Around Us Project. "The rationale for this certification is on further thin ice because the catch is destined to feed farmed fish, pigs and chicken."

Fisheries that are being heavily depleted, reliant on high-impact methods such as bottom trawling and that aren't destined for human consumption should be excluded from certification, conclude the authors, which include Sidney Holt, a founding father of fisheries science.

"The MSC should not certify fisheries that are not demonstrably sustainable, fisheries that use high-impact methods such as bottom trawling and/or fisheries that aren't destined for human consumption," says Pauly.

"The MSC needs to strengthen its commitment to its own principles in order to fulfill its promise to be 'the best environmental choice,'" says Jackson.

The authors also note that the current certification system, which relies on for-profit consultants and could cost as much as \$150,000, presents a potential conflict of interest and discriminates against small-scale fisheries and fisheries from developing countries – most of which use highly-selective and sustainable techniques.

Dayton points out that "the failure of the MSC hurts the populations that are not sustainably taken and their ecosystems; it deprives the public of an opportunity to make a meaningful choice and it damages those fisheries that are well managed – this is especially important for those sustainable small-scale fisheries competing with the giants that buy certifications they have not earned."

"Unless MSC goes under major reform, there are better, more effective ways to spend the certifier's \$13-million annual budget to help the oceans, such as lobbying for the elimination of harmful fisheries subsidies or establishing marine protected areas," says Jacquet.

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