

LEADING fisheries experts have expressed concerns about the process by which the Marine Stewardship Council – the most established certifier of sustainable fisheries worldwide – goes about its certification and have called on the organisation to undergo “major reform” of its procedures.

Writing this week in the international journal *Nature*, the scientists, chiefly from the University of British Columbia Fisheries Centre and the Scripps Institution of Oceanography, have suggested the MSC is failing in its promise to “promote the best environmental choice in seafood”.

The authors count themselves among “scores of scientists and many environment groups” who are protesting over various MSC procedures or certifications and suggest the organisation is risking its credibility. As a result, they say, “the planet risks losing more wild fish and healthy marine ecosystems”.

The scientists write that the situation can be turned around “only if the MSC creates more stringent standards, cracks down on arguably loose interpretation of its rules, and alters its process to avoid a potential financial incentive to certify large fisheries”.

The MSC, founded in 1997 by the WWF and Unilever, one of the world’s largest seafood retailers, has become the world’s most established fisheries certifier. Ninety-four fisheries are currently MSC-certified, accounting for about seven per cent of global catch, and about 118 more are under assessment.

MSC-certified seafood products are eligible to bear their blue ecolabel identifying their origin from a sustainable source.

Among the article’s authors are Daniel Pauly and Sidney Holt, who advised the MSC as it was starting up. They now believe “the incentives of the market have led the MSC certification scheme away from its original goal, towards promoting the certification of ever-larger capital-intensive operations”.

They suggest there is a potential financial conflict of interest in the certification system – “certifiers that leniently interpret existing criteria might expect to receive more work and profit from ongoing annual audits” – and that the objections procedure is flawed because, among other things, it deals more with bureaucratic issues than biological ones.

The authors also claim that while some MSC-certified fisheries adhere to, and even exceed, the principles that underlie the MSC's certification scheme, many do not.

Responding to the article, the MSC insists its measure of sustainability is scientifically sound.

In a statement, the MSC said: “The bar at which a fishery demonstrates it is well-managed and sustainable represents a broad scientific consensus, agreed by over 200 marine biologists, scientists, environmentalists and other stakeholders from around the world, over the course of a two-year consultation period.

“Every fishery certified to the MSC standard is sustainable and well-managed and fisheries are not, as the authors assert, certified before they can demonstrate their sustainability.”