

Mola mola

a nature network blog by Tom Webb

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Having your fish and eating it

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Fish fish fish fish fish.Fish fish fish fish.Eating fish! [*Fish, by Mr Scruff*]

It is impossible for anyone who has ever studied marine fisheries ecology not to feel a twinge of guilt about joining in Mr Scruff's enthusiastic refrain. Fish stocks globally are in such a **sorry state**, subject to such unsustainable exploitation, that to eat wild fish seems incompatible with any kind of environmental sensibility. At the same time, though, seafood's just so damn tasty, and **healthy** to boot - so what to do?

Complete avoidance of fish, crustaceans, molluscs, etc. is one option, but (for reasons of taste, health, described above) not a particularly palatable one. An alternative is to ignore the problem - these things are dead anyway, everyone else is eating them, have you even seen **Tokyo fish market**?! - and eat away whilst ignoring any pangs of conscience. Certainly, I have dined with eminent professors of marine conservation, and watched them tuck into tuna and cod without batting an eyelid. But for me those pangs refuse simply to disappear.

The **Marine Stewardship Council** scheme therefore seemed to offer the ideal Third Way: by labelling seafood as 'sustainably produced', one could scoff away at will, conscience untroubled. And wasn't the increasing prevalence of the little blue stickers on supermarket fish counters a beautiful illustration of the power of consumer choice?

And then along comes **this article** by Jennifer Jacquet, Daniel Pauly, and a crack team of other highly respected marine ecologists to piss on this particular eco-consumer bonfire. According to these authors,

Certain MSC-certified fisheries... do adhere to - or even exceed - the principles that underlie the MSC's certification scheme [*i.e. to 'promote the best environmental choice in seafood', allowing fishing to continue indefinitely without overexploiting resources, diminishing the productivity of the ecosystem, or violating any local, national or international laws*]. It is our assessment that many others do not.

They cite examples such as the US pollock fishery, which is MSC certified despite a recent 2/3 reduction in biomass of the stock; or the Pacific hake

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stock which was recently certified, although its biomass is just 10% of what it was in the 1980s. Their conclusion?

We believe that, as the MSC increasingly risks its credibility, the planet risks losing more wild fish and healthy marine ecosystems... We believe that 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.

So what should I do? I suppose I can be slightly smug that [Waitrose](#), where I most often buy seafood, has refused to stock some MSC-certified products where it deems certification too lenient, due to destructive fishing methods ([Whole Foods](#) has done the same). But is a labelling scheme the right approach to conserving the marine environment? [Jacquet et al.](#) argue that if the MSC is not reformed, its £8M budget could be better spent on lobbying to eliminate fisheries subsidies, or to create [marine protected areas](#). That's maybe true, but it would reinstate a sense of impotence among consumers (at least, among those of us reluctant completely to forego our seafood). I quite like their suggestion of an alternative certification, more akin to the [Fairtrade](#) mark used for coffee (which recognises only small cooperatives, not large plantations), which would shift the focus away from huge fishing enterprises back towards smaller-scale fisheries which do tend to be more sustainable.

But for now, I will have to continue lecturing on marine conservation whilst sneaking - well, perhaps not 'guilt free', but at least 'lo-guilt', certified fish from time to time.

Posted by [Tom Webb](#) on [Sep 6, 2010](#)

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 Posted by: [Sukhbir Rattan](#) | [Sep 7, 2010](#)

Not since my certified, line caught haddock on Sunday! (tempted by sushi for lunch though...)

 Posted by: **Tom Webb** | Sep 8, 2010

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