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## Marine Stewardship Council Loses Its Luster

Posted by Barry on February 3, 2010



Happier times: the cover of the Marine Stewardship Council's current annual report

Long regarded as the gold-standard for eco-certification of sustainable fisheries around the world, the London-based [Marine Stewardship Council](#) (MSC) has begun to lose some of its glitter, in the eyes of many of the scientists and environmentalists meeting in Paris this week at the Seafood Choice's Alliance's annual [Seafood Summit](#).

The flashpoint is the council's plans to grant certification to the British Columbia's Fraser River sockeye salmon fishery. The [final decision](#) is expected to be announced next week.

"I almost choked when I heard that they were planning to certify Fraser River sockeye. The population is in freefall," said Daniel Pauly in an interview. Pauly, who was the keynote speaker at the summit, is a renowned marine scientist and author and the principal investigator at the University of British Columbia's Fisheries Centre. He was also one of the advisors called in to lend the MSC solid scientific credibility when the organization was founded back in the late 1990s.

Canadian environmental groups, at least three of which sent delegates to Paris specific to lobby against MSC certification of Fraser sockeye, say that the fishery—far from being sustainably harvested—may be collapsing.

They point out that in six of the last eleven years, the fishery has been closed due to poor returns of breeding salmon. Last year, despite the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Ocean's prediction of a run of 10.7 million fish, only 1.7 million made the journey upriver to



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- Just released. Appalling film on the environmental (and human) evils of salmon farming. YUCK! My blog: <http://politicsoftheplate.com/>

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- [The Wild and the Farmed](#) For salmon, there is only one choice.

## 3 comments

The Fraser's closure to all commercial fishing, she said, was a sign that the resource was being managed effectively. "It's an appropriate management response to allow the stock to rebuild."

Exactly why the MSC is moving ahead with such vigor remains unclear. Activists speculate that the province's salmon processors have come under pressure to get eco-certification from supermarket chains in Britain (where the MSC label carries more clout than it does in North America). Pauly points out that at this point the MSC would be in an awkward position to back out because the applicants have already invested huge amounts of money in the costly certification process.

Kerry Coughlin, MSC's Seattle-based regional director for the America's said that she can remember no fishery being refused certification this late in the process. But she asserted that the pending approval should have come as no surprise.

"The way the MSC process works is that stakeholders are invited and encouraged to have input all the way through," she said. "The MSC program is based on three principles: Are the fish stocks healthy, is the fishery damaging the marine ecosystem, and—key here—is there an ongoing effective management of that fishery. Our decisions are based on peer-reviewed scientific research."

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Pauly expressed concern that the B. C. situation may be part of a trend. The MSC has been certifying new fisheries at an almost dizzying rate. Currently it gives its blessing to 59 of them, up from 38 in 2008. There are an additional 120 under assessment, most of which will get approved, if past trends continue.

MSC auditors have recommended that it recertify Alaska's pollock fishery, even though the Monterey Bay Aquarium's highly regarded Seafood Watch program [downgraded the fishery](#) in January, saying that the trawls it uses, which are supposed to operate in "mid-water" frequently scrape and damage the ocean floor.

Seafood Watch also cites by-catch of king salmon as a problem. The aquarium is particularly concerned about kings that return to the Yukon River, where they once supported a small seafood processing company that provided the sole source of income for local natives. For the past two years, that company has been closed due to a lack of fish. Because of that the United States Commerce Department has officially designated the area a "disaster."

There are also concerns that the pollock catch is robbing stellar sea lions and northern fur seals of food. And, while still huge, the annual pollock catch has been dropping steadily for the last several years.

The sheer size of the pollock industry makes some observers wonder whether it has become too big to fail for the MSC. With a value of more than \$1 billion, it is the United States most lucrative fishery (if you've ever eaten a fish stick, an institutional fish and chip dinner, or a fast-food fish burger you've had pollock without knowing it). This one species alone represented 60 percent of the volume of MSC-certified fish in 2008.

"I'm afraid that certification is a one direction movement—once a fishery gets certified it's going to take large numbers of very well trained and powerful horses to pull it over to the other side," said Paul Johnston, principal scientist at Greenpeace Research Laboratories. "The presumption is that once it is certified, it will stay certified. But is you look at what's going on in the pollock fishery, it looks to me like its teetering along a knife edge."

The MSC's Coughlin defends her organization's stance on the pollock fishery. "Their by-catch is quite low." She said. "99.9 percent of the catch is target stock and that is an

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- [February 2010](#) (5)
- [January 2010](#) (6)
- [December 2009](#) (4)
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**Bart Anderson says:**  
February 4, 2010 at 6:40 am  
extremely high for any fishery. True, because it's a large fishery, it does take a large total number of salmon. But is the pollock fishery contributing to the depletion of the salmon fishery? Or does the private certification label business model, no? Eventually MSC

Controversy also surrounded the MSC's [recertification](#) of the South Georgia (a British island in the South Atlantic) Chilean sea bass fishery last fall, long after most conscientious seafood eaters and chefs had taken a pass on the embattled species.

True, the Georgian fishery is well-managed, but because the dismal levels of the general Chilean sea bass population, and rampant, illegal overfishing, many environmentalists questioned the wisdom of the decision. The South Georgian catch represents only a small fraction of the total Chilean sea bass take, but many experts fear that by granting that fishery its imprimatur, the MSC has opened the door to confusion on the part of consumers and provided a conduit for illicit Chilean sea bass to find its way onto restaurant menus and into the marketplace.

"As I look at these decisions, one seems more absurd than the other," said Pauly. He said that a core principle in conservation is that, when in doubt, certifiers should err on the side of caution. "If not, what the hell is the MSC all about?"

has to run out of sustainable fisheries to deem acceptable and, then, "making improvements" becomes an appropriate benchmark.

Also, what does MSC charge for the use of its label?



**David Loewen says:**

February 9, 2010 at 6:03 pm



Nice post. Yeah, MSC has really messed up and I think might be going down over the next while with all hands on deck.

You mention the Bering Sea pollock fishery. Yes, kings (Chinook) by-catch is a major issues especially with the announcement last month by U.S. Commerce Secretary Locke of a "fishery disaster" on the Yukon River.

Currently, the Bering Sea pollock fishery (MSC certified) is catching upwards of 60,000 Chinook largely bound for the Yukon River – that's more than the commercial fishers have caught on the Yukon in a few years.

Added to the mess, MSC has certified all Alaskan salmon fisheries – including the recently collapsed one on the Yukon River. Not only that the Yukon River fishery had some of the highest scores in the recent MSC re-assessment.

Another addition, the Bering Sea pollock fishery catches over 700,000 other salmon as by-catch. Now that's sustainable...

The potential eco-certification of BC sockeye fisheries is an absolute sham.

Please visit my site: <http://www.salmonguy.org> for more info on the MSC assessments. And keep up the good posts.

**Roz Cummins says:**

February 16, 2010 at 10:03 am



Thank you for publishing this. I am eager to see what the end result of all of this will be.

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