

Marine Stewardship Council's Marine Stewardship Questionable, Scientists Say

by Matthew McDermott, New York, NY on 09. 3. 10



photo: Mr. T in DC via flickr

A bit of a sustainable seafood smackdown is ongoing: In a new opinion piece in the journal *Nature* scientists from the University of British Columbia, Scripps Institution of Oceanography, and other institutions have called out the [Marine Stewardship Council](#) for not doing a good job at marine stewardship. As is to be expected, MSC strongly disagrees.

You can read the whole opinion piece, [Seafood stewardship in crisis](#) (pay per read or subscription required), but these are the major points:

Fisheries Certified Prematurely, Regardless of Fishing Method Used & Wrongly, For Use as Animal Feed

Lead author Jennifer Jacquet of [UBC](#) claims that MSC "has turned against biology in favor of bureaucracy." With Scripps' Jeremy Jackson citing what seems to be an ill-advised sustainable certification in 2005 of the pollock fishery in the Bering Sea.

Pollock has been certified despite a 64 percent decline of the population's spawning biomass between 2004 and 2009, with no solid evidence of recovery. This has worrisome implications for possible harmful impacts on other species and fisheries, besides the availability of the pollock fishery itself. How is that sustainable?

Daniel Pauly, head of UBC's [Sea Around Us Project](#), raises concerns about the certification of krill from the Antarctic:

We're especially concerned about the recent certification of Antarctic krill despite estimate of long-term decline and a link between krill population depletion and declining sea ice in areas sensitive to climate change. The rationale for this certification is on further thin ice because the catch is destined to feed farmed fish, pigs and chickens.

Pauly concludes, "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."

MSC: Fisheries Certified on Science-Based Standards...

In [their official statement](#), the Marine Stewardship Council addresses Pauly's point.

The authors express their opinion that fisheries that use bottom trawls or utilize the catch for the production of fishmeal should not be viewed as responsible and sustainable. The MSC program does not prescribe gear types or specify the final use of the fishery products. Instead, as an outcome based program, it requires all fisheries seeking to be certified meet the science-based principles and criteria of the MSC standard that together are a measure of the status of the stock, the level of impact on the environment, and the management system the fishery has in place.

The 'open' approach of the MSC program meets the requirement of the guidelines of the UN FAO for a global certification and ecolabel program for fish products. Consequently, the program is open to all fisheries to be assessed against the rigorous, science-based standard.

...And These Programs Drive Positive Change

The response is quite lengthy, including further direct rebuttal of the fisheries singled out in the *Nature* piece, but here's the MSC bottom line:

The MSC accepts the need to continue to demonstrate the effectiveness of its program to all its stakeholders: it has, for example, commissioned scientific research which will, when complete, provide the most comprehensive analysis to date of the environmental impacts of fishery certification.

The rigor, credibility and scientific consensus underpinning the MSC standard and methodology has, since 1999, encouraged significant support from fisheries, NGOs, the supply chain, governments and others that has helped create a global market for sustainable seafood that today accounts for seven per cent of total wild-capture landings. There is a growing evidence base that certification is driving positive change in the way the world's oceans are fished, as well as helping more consumers make sustainable seafood choices.

The last part is certainly true. There is good evidence that certification programs are helping change the way consumers view seafood, and help with fisheries management. However, something tells me MSC's response alone won't be last we hear about this debate.

In the meantime, organizations such as the Monterey Bay Aquarium, whose [Seafood Watch Program](#) makes recommendations on sustainable seafood choices based on a combination of government reports, journal articles, and other sources, remain reliable sources in helping ensure the seafood you eat comes from healthy fisheries.

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