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## FOOD



## SUSTAINABILITY

Feb 4 2010, 8:52 am by [Barry Estabrook](#)**"Sustainable" Fish: A Sham?**

PHOTO BY [PUAMELIA]/FLICKRCC

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—at least in the eyes of many of the scientists and environmentalists meeting in Paris this week at the Seafood Choices Alliance's annual [Seafood Summit](#).

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

**Pauly expressed concern that the British Columbia situation may be part of a trend.**

"I almost choked when I heard that they were planning to certify Fraser River sockeye. The population is in freefall," Daniel Pauly said in an interview. Pauly, the keynote speaker at the summit, is a renowned marine scientist 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 scientific credibility when the organization was founded in the late nineties.

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## BARRY ESTABROOK

**Barry Estabrook** was formerly a contributing editor at *Gourmet* magazine. Stints working on a dairy farm and commercial fishing boat as a young man convinced him that writing about how food was produced was a lot easier than actually producing it. He lives on a 30-acre tract in Vermont where he gardens and tends a dozen laying hens. [Learn more at his Web site.](#)



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

They point out that in six of the last 11 years, the fishery has been closed due to poor returns of breeding salmon. Last year, although the Canadian Department of Fisheries and Oceans predicted a run of 10.7 million fish, only 1.7 million made the journey upriver to spawn. The [International Union of Conservation for Nature](#) recently declared three of the Fraser's genetically distinct salmon populations endangered, and one other is critically endangered. Meanwhile, the Canadian government has launched a judicial inquiry into how its own officials failed to predict this year's absence of fish.

"We're supportive of MSC certification generally, but we are trying to stop this one dead," said Craig Orr, executive director of [Watershed Watch Salmon Society](#), an environmental group in British Columbia.

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 pointed out that at this point backing out would put the MSC in an awkward position, 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 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." The Fraser River'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."

Pauly expressed concern that the British Columbia 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 [bycatch](#) 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. 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 fishburger, 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 if you look at what's going on in the pollock fishery, it looks to me like it's teetering along a knife edge."

The MSC's Coughlin defends her organization's stance on the pollock fishery. "Their bycatch is quite low," she said. "99.9 percent of the catch is target stock, and that is an extremely high rate 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? The certifier determined that it is not."



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AUTHOR

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Controversy also surrounded the MSC's recertification of the South Georgia Island [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 of the dismal levels of the general Chilean sea bass population, and rampant, illegal overfishing, many environmentalists questioned the MSC's wisdom. 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 their way into the marketplace.

It makes one wonder what the MSC is thinking. After all, Pauly noted that a core principle in conservation is that, when in doubt, certifiers should err on the side of caution.

"If not," he added, "what the hell is the MSC all about?"

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**Ed Bruske**

February 4, 2010 11:30 AM

Then what are we to make of the MSC's certification of the patagonian toothfish (Chilean seabass) fisher of South Georgia. Seafood Watch appears to have finally embraced that certification after listing this fish as "avoid" for the longest time. Any problem with the MSC certification of the Alaska fisheries? Anybody left we can trust?

[Reply](#)

**Hugo X** (REPLYING TO: [ED BRUSKE](#))

February 4, 2010 2:03 PM

*Anybody left we can trust?*

Only ourselves - As always. And if we can't trust ourselves - don't expect too much from others. Anyway - can somebody explain why the fisheries are not protecting their livelihood themselves? What is going on - nobody has more to lose from empty oceans and yet the fisheries are pushing to destroy themselves - why? I think the answer goes to the heart of human nature. But most importantly - can you explain to me what a rain-forest ape is doing out on the oceans? We are apes - what are we doing out there and why? Is there not enough food on land and especially trees?

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