

Scientists fearful for fish stocks

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September 26, 2009

AT A time of crashing wild fish stocks and wary consumers, a blue tick on a seafood label is becoming sales gold.

Australians can find the Marine Stewardship Council's tick for sustainable fishing on a tin of John West's Alaska pink salmon, or a yellow-eyed mullet lunch in the upmarket restaurant, Rockpool.

Globally, MSC-approved fisheries already catch more than 5 million tonnes of seafood. Such is its success that, with 50 fisheries certified, another 100 are in assessment.

But attempts by industrial fishers to get MSC approval of some of the last unexploited fisheries have led scientists to question the way the tick is awarded. They say certification may encourage fisheries depletion.

Alarmed by plans to certify Antarctic fisheries, the British fisheries science doyen, Sidney Holt, told *The Age*: "The MSC, which started as a good idea, has become a danger to conservation and sustainable management."

Another global authority on fish stocks, Daniel Pauly, is worried by a plan to seek certification for the keystone fish, Peruvian anchovy, to be used for fishmeal. Dr Pauly wrote recently: "The MSC is making a mistake. The issue is not whether the fishery is well managed, but what we do with the fish."

Our consumption of fish is this year expected to reach a tipping point, according to the UN's Food and Agriculture Organisation. Such is the loss of wild fish that more than half of what we eat will come from aquaculture for the first time.

The eminent American marine scientist Sylvia Earle said that about 90 per cent of big predatory fish in the sea - marlin, swordfish and sharks - had gone. High-priced tunas such as southern bluefin are also down to 10 per cent of their original numbers.

Formed by the Unilever Corporation and World Wildlife Fund, the MSC had a rocky beginning, but recent partnerships with companies such as American retail giant Walmart have seen its prestige boom.

The MSC's deputy chief executive, Chris Ninnis, told *The Age* from London: "I think you are seeing a consumer groundswell in the way people think about the fish they buy."

The council's job is to set and maintain sustainability standards that are used by independent certification professionals who are contracted by fishing companies to measure up a fishery.

The Antarctic fisheries are seen as a vital test by marine scientists. A group of 30 scientists sharply criticised a draft MSC approval recommended by the certifier, Moody Marine, for Antarctic toothfish in the Ross Sea.

"If it is true ... that very little is known about the life history and movements of the species, this in itself is enough to render any sustainability certification process entirely inappropriate," the scientists said.

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