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Scientists Criticize System of Certifying Fisheries

By *DAVID JOLLY*

As I noted back in June, the Marine Stewardship Council has come under increasing fire for giving its stamp of approval to industrial fisheries that some scientists say are anything but environmentally sustainable.

Now, a number of marine scientists have argued in the journal *Nature* that the council is not living up to its promises, and they are calling for it to change.

The scientists — Jennifer Jacquet and Daniel Pauly of the University of British Columbia fisheries center; Sidney Holt, one of the fathers of modern fisheries science; Paul Dayton and Jeremy Jackson of the Scripps Institute; and David Ainley, a marine ecologist — say:

Objections to MSC certifications are growing. Scores of scientists (including ourselves) and many conservation groups, including *Greenpeace*, the Pew Environment Group and some national branches of the WWF, have protested over various MSC procedures or certifications. We believe that, as the MSC increasingly risks its credibility, the planet risks losing more wild fish and healthy marine ecosystems.

The council was founded in 1995 by the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, with the aim of helping consumers to choose fish that had been harvested responsibly. Under the council's system, third-party contractors charge the fisheries a fee of \$20,000 to more than \$100,000 to assess them and recommend whether they should be certified. The council then acts.

In exchange for their dollars and adoption of best practices, the fisheries gain the right to use the council's blue logo on their packaging, an arrangement that in theory allows them to charge more to conscientious buyers.

The scientists argue in their *Nature* piece that "the certification system creates a potential financial conflict of interest, because certifiers that leniently interpret existing criteria might expect to receive more work and profit from ongoing annual audits." And they note that objecting to an assessment cost "up to £15,000 until August 2010, when the MSC lowered the maximum fee to £5,000" — a tall barrier for nongovernmental organizations wishing to protest.

Criticism of the council is not new, but it shows that conservationists are growing impatient with supposed market-based solutions to overfishing and other threats to marine life. Government measures to limit overexploitation are the only proven means of saving fish stocks, many argue.

In its early years, scientists told me as I was researching my June article, the council did valuable work, helping small fisheries to reduce their environmental impacts. But as Paul Greenberg noted in his recent book, "Four Fish," problems became apparent with the MSC's approach as soon as it began certifying industrial fisheries, as was the case with a fish called the New Zealand hoki back in 2001.

Certified sustainable, then overfished with habitat-destroying bottom trawlers, the hoki stock crashed. It was then nonetheless recertified.

The case about which I wrote, the Antarctic krill, appears to be the straw that broke the camel's back. Many Antarctic scientists were already unhappy with MSC's preliminary decision to certify the Antarctic toothfish (also known as Chilean sea bass), a fish about which very little is known.

In their *Nature* article, the scientists wrote that much of the krill — tiny crustaceans valued for their omega-3 fats — will end up in pig and chicken feed. "Any fishery undertaken for fishmeal should not be viewed as responsible or sustainable, and should not qualify for MSC certification," they said. They argued that MSC also ignored signs of long-term decline in krill populations.

In its [response](#), the council argued that "the MSC standard is a measure of the sustainability of a fishery against well-defined principles and criteria," representing a broad scientific consensus. "Every fishery certified to the MSC standard is sustainable and well-managed and fisheries are not, as the authors assert, certified before they can demonstrate their sustainability," the MSC wrote.

The scientists called on the council to undergo "major reform." Otherwise, they argue, its budget could be spent more effectively, for example by "lobbying to eliminate harmful fisheries subsidies, or creating marine protected areas."