

Fish stories: Seafood eco-labels not always reliable, says study

BY MARGARET MUNRO, POSTMEDIA NEWS SEPTEMBER 1, 2010



A program that's supposed to certify sustainably harvested fish is fraught with "eco-babble" and misleading claims, says a recent report.

Photograph by: Tomohiro Onsumi, Bloomberg News

VANCOUVER — So much for guilt-free seafood.

An international program run by the Marine Stewardship Council purports to certify only sustainably harvested fish but is "failing" to protect the environment and needs radical reform, says a highly critical report released Wednesday.

Many of the MSC's claims are "eco-babble" and very misleading, Jennifer Jacquet, a University of B.C. researcher and co-author of the report, said this week as she checked out the seafood at Capers, a trendy grocery store in Vancouver.

Fresh halibut was selling for \$49.90 a kilogram under one of the council's aqua blue signs guaranteeing "sustainability" and "a sound environmental choice."

The certification program is run by the non-profit council based in London. The MSC's blue "eco-labels" can be found on seafood sold at Capers, Whole Foods Markets and Walmart in North America and many stores in Europe.

Controversy has been brewing over the certification program for years but the MSC's recent decision to slap its eco-label on an Antarctic krill fishery prompted the researchers to spell out their concerns in the journal *Nature* this week. Jacquet is a resource management specialist who authored the report with noted UBC fisheries biologist Daniel Pauly and colleagues in the U.S. and Italy.

In May, the council certified the krill fishery, despite scientific evidence that suggests the shrimp-like creatures at the base of the Antarctic food chain are in decline. Much of the krill caught is used to feed farmed fish, pigs and chicken and "any fishery undertaken for fish meal should not be viewed as responsible or sustainable, and should not qualify for MSC certification," the researchers say.

Co-author Paul Dayton, at the University of California's Scripps Institution of Oceanography, said the krill certification "is an embarrassment as it flies in the face of existing data and denies any sense of precautionary management."

The MSC argues that the less than one per cent of krill is under fishing pressure.

The report also takes issue with the way the council's eco-labels adorn fish that have undergone serious declines.

The U.S. trawl fishery for pollock in the eastern Bering Sea is the largest certified fishery, with an annual catch of one million tonnes. "It was certified in 2005, and recommended for recertification this summer, despite the fact that the spawning biomass of those pollock fell by 64 per cent between 2004 and 2009," the report says.

"Similar declines in biomass" have occurred in Pacific hake, the report says, noting that the hake "was certified in 2009 despite a population decline of 89 per cent since a peak in the late 1980s."

The researchers say "certification should not be granted until a fishery is shown to be actually sustainable."

The council acknowledges the hake and pollock have seen "declines" but insist the fisheries deserve certification. "The stock is rebuilding and continued improvements in Alaska pollock biomass is expected as favourable conditions prevail," said Mike DeCesare, director of MSC communications in North America.

The council was created in 1997 by the World Wildlife Fund and Unilever, one of the world's largest seafood retailers. It has certified 94 fisheries which account for about seven per cent of the global catch, including several in Canadian waters.

It is now assessing 118 more fisheries, including the Antarctic toothfish, which is sold as Chilean sea bass. Many environmental groups oppose certification of the toothfish, and with good reason, says the *Nature* report: "Almost nothing is known about this fish: no eggs or larvae have even been collected."

Jacquet, Pauly and their colleagues are calling on the council to adopt more stringent standards, crack down on its "arguably loose interpretation" of sustainability, and alter its process "to avoid a potential financial incentive to certify large fisheries."

If the current certification "scheme" doesn't undergo "major reform" they say, there are "better, more effective ways" to spend the MSC's \$13 million-a-year budget, such as eliminating harmful fisheries subsidies, or creating marine-protected areas. Such measures could "have a real impact on the water," said Jacquet.

She said the reality is that there is not enough seafood to meet the current global appetite. Consumers need to accept the need to "scale back on consumption," she said, and at the same time "hassle" politicians and industry to take concrete steps to better protect fisheries.

At Capers, the staff selling fish under the MSC label referred queries to Vicki Foley, in public relations at Whole Foods Market, which owns Capers. Foley did not return calls before deadline. A salesclerk said that Capers is no longer selling supplements made from krill because of "ethical" concerns. But she said she could special-order the krill supplements if customers want to buy them.

DeCesare, at the MSC, said the report in *Nature* is the "personal opinion" of the authors. The council, he said, bases its certification on "rigorous and independent science."

"There is no question that improvements in the MSC standard will continue to enhance its effectiveness," DeCesare said by email. "But the facts also demonstrate there is no question that for more than a decade the MSC, along with its many partners, has been contributing significantly to environmental progress around the world."