

Green fisheries in crisis

The Marine Stewardship Council is under fire for flawed certification of fisheries

The world's only label to certify sustainable and well managed fisheries, the London-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), lacks credibility and will collapse unless drastically reformed, say confidential reports compiled for its funding organizations.

A crisis meeting of the MSC board is being held on Monday and Tuesday to discuss reports that urge the former Conservative environment secretary John Gummer to stand down from the chairmanship. There are also demands for a widening of the membership and expertise of the management to regain the trust of conservation and environmental groups.

Fish from across the world sold in British supermarkets carry the MSC logo, but claims that the fisheries it certifies are sustainable should be dropped because consumers are being duped, say the reports obtained by the *Guardian*.

The investigation into the MSC was ordered by five large US foundations that fund conservation work. They were concerned that despite the MSC's high-profile support from the Prince of Wales and Queen Noor of Jordan, the certification given to some fisheries was unjustified.

Four special investigations into fisheries the MSC has certified were carried out and researchers said none was flawless. They were the New Zealand hoki, Alaskan salmon, the South Georgian toothfish, and Aleutian Islands pollock fisheries in Alaska, the largest fishery in the world, from where most of the white fish in McDonald's and other fast food restaurants comes. The hoki fishery failed to comply with the New Zealand fisheries act, which requires action be taken to

avoid adverse effects on the aquatic environment.

The Patagonian toothfish, also marketed as Chilean seabass, has been drastically overfished by pirate boats across the southern oceans and to certify one small part of the fishery in South Georgia was felt to be an encouragement to the illegal trade. The MSC certifies only 4 per cent of the world's wild fish, but is widely accepted in British and European markets and is seen by governments and the industry as good for sales.

Many more fisheries are going through the preliminary stages of getting certified and the MSC is growing fast.

But both reports believe that without the backing of environmental and conservation groups the credibility of the organization will be terminally undermined. The most stinging criticism comes from an independent Wildhavens consultancy, which interviewed conservation groups, the fishing industry, retailers and MSC staff.

Its main recommendation is that the board of trustees should recognize it had reached a "critical tipping point" and must act speedily "to restore its credibility and prevent the organization's failure". The burden of proof to show that certification will enhance the marine environment was with the MSC and it must show that it did not provide an undeserved "green shield" for inadequate fisheries management.

Management changes

The report also called for management changes, including Mr Gummer handing over the chairmanship, although it suggests he stays on the organization's board. There are also criticisms of staff



leadership, which is regarded as an attack on the chief executive, Brendan May.

Mr Gummer said he had no intention of resigning. The MSC had cooperated in both inquiries, he said.

The organization had the difficulties of operating a certification system acceptable to industry, governments and the environmental movement. Some of the criticisms were from a particular American viewpoint, which took an absolutist view on what was "sustainable".

Mr May said both reports were helpful and constructive and many of the changes suggested would be implemented. Some were already under way. He did not think the criticisms threatened his position as Chief Executive. ¶

This article by environment correspondent Paul Brown first appeared in *The Guardian* of 21 February 2004