

# Get Out of the Spotlight !

The ecolabelling programme of the Marine Stewardship Council is biased towards industrial-scale fisheries and has little relevance for small-scale fisheries

In 1997, Unilever and the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) formed the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), a seafood certification body that, according to its 1998 vision statement, was intended to “safeguard the world’s seafood supply.” Through its certification and ecolabeling programme, MSC aimed to harness consumer power to ensure a sustainable flow of seafood into the global market. The organization’s mission does not include safeguarding fishing cultures or ecosystems.

conscious countries suffering economic hardship, how many consumers will actually pay more for their fish? And if paid, will premiums ever find their way into fishers’ pockets? The MSC standards have nothing to say on this. But if a significant number of fisheries take the bait and opt for ecolabelling, then certification eventually becomes a requirement for market access, adding another cost to doing business—a premium paid by fishers for the chance to sell at any price.

As Stefano Ponte points out in his case study, “Ecolabels and Fish Trade: Marine Stewardship Council Certification and the South African Hake Industry”, the MSC is a technical, economic instrument through which seafood trading corporations can outsource responsibility for sustainable fisheries, and shift the implementation costs onto the backs of fishermen. “Increased sustainability may indeed result from these initiatives, but Northern consumers and corporations rarely foot the bill” says Ponte.

Small-scale fishers in the developing world, and rural or depressed areas of the developed world, will underwrite the MSC certification scheme, and the costs go beyond the price tag of assessment. The MSC does not assess the social impacts when large fishing operations break fishers’ unions and harvest stocks that have historically supported small-scale fisheries.

## Certification limits

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With the MSC aggressively courting small-scale fishers, particularly in developing countries, those considering certification would do well to study the MSC’s mission, and try to understand the costs and benefits—particularly, who pays the costs, and who reaps the benefits.

In her article, “Winning with Certification”, published in *SAMUDRA Report* No. 56, July 2010. MSC Programme Manager, Developing World Fisheries, Oluyemisi Oloruntuyo highlights the premium prices occasionally garnered by MSC-certified products as an enticement to join the programme. But experienced fishers and traders know that the premiums go to the early adopters of any production or marketing innovation, and commonsense begs two questions: With most ecolabel-

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certification scheme,” says Brendan May, former Chief Executive Officer of MSC, dismissing issues outside the MSC’s vision statement. The MSC is not obliged to apologize for the way it has been structured, and it would be hard pressed to address all the issues raised by its critics.

For the MSC, ‘sustainability’ means fisheries that supply a steady flow of seafood into the global market, which requires an ‘economy-of-scale’ certification system based primarily on science. As long as a fishery’s harvest is at, or below, target stock recruitment levels and the gear is deemed reasonably selective, a fishery that chooses to can usually meet MSC’s standards.

But the increasing number of suspect seafood products bearing the MSC ecolabel has raised questions about the organization’s commitment to its own standards. Eminent fisheries scientists, including Daniel Pauly and Sydney Holt, writing in the September 2010 issue of *Nature*, have criticized the MSC for its certification of several fisheries, including the poorly understood Chilean sea bass and the Antarctic krill fisheries.

While the MSC has revised its mission statement to include the concept of ocean health, most of the seafood wearing the MSC ecolabel still comes from industrial-scale trawl fisheries, most of which have bycatch issues—the consequences of which remain unknown—and histories of exceeding quotas. Certification may look good on paper, but these fisheries take place far from the public eye. Without 100 per cent observer coverage, the potential for high-grading, and under-reporting bycatch and landings is too obvious to ignore. The damage trawling does to the seafloor adds another cost to be borne by the fish and fishers. According to the Monterey Bay Aquarium, mid-water trawl nets used in the MSC-certified Alaska pollock fishery are in contact with the seafloor 44 per cent of the time they are in the water, and “habitat and ecosystem effects of the pollock

fishery are considered to be ‘severe’, according to Seafood Watch criteria.”

As Ponte suggests in his case study, the MSC’s need to balance corporate profitability with sustainability has turned certification into “a ritual” that enables industrial fishers and traders to “increase their visibility in the market place under the guise of sustainability.”

As noted by Oloruntuyo in her article in *SAMUDRA Report*, fisheries in developing countries provide half the world’s seafood exports. In order for the MSC to achieve its goal of maintaining a sustainable flow of seafood into the world market—primarily, the metropolitan areas of developed countries—it needs to find a way to certify these fisheries. Rather than make premiums for producers part of its standards—a promise of economic well-being for fishing communities—the MSC encourages fishers to add value to their products by purchasing a certificate of sustainability.

To make small-scale fisheries certification possible within its industrial-scale model, the MSC proposes to base assessments of many data-poor fisheries on ‘proxies’. The MSC is experimenting with Productivity Susceptibility Analysis (PSA) as a proxy for data in several small-scale fisheries. PSA is a

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105 fisheries are certified to the MSC ecolabel. Most of them come from industrial-scale trawl fisheries

subjective measure of a target stock's productivity, and susceptibility to overfishing, based on likelihood of interaction with the gear being used. There is a PSA spreadsheet that can be used to assess almost any fishery; certifiers plug 'best guess' numbers into the respective columns, and determine whether a fishery meets MSC standards or not.

Understandably, data-poor fisheries must be assessed subjectively, and PSA is a useful tool, but it fails to measure many qualities of small-scale fisheries, such as equitable access to, and distribution of, fisheries resources; inter-generational relationships, ecological relationships, and needs of local consumers, all of which encompass a more holistic view of sustainability. PSA amounts to very rough science that provides the MSC certifiers with an approximation of the harvest/recruitment data used in assessing industrial-scale fisheries.

As it does with industrial fisheries, the MSC scheme concerns itself with product flow from small-scale fisheries. Since the well-being of fishers, communities and ecosystems falls outside the limits of the MSC's

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standards, many consider its ecolabel inappropriate for small-scale fisheries. In 2008, over 200 small-scale fishers from around the world met at a civil society preparatory workshop ahead of the FAO Global Conference on Small-scale Fisheries (4SSF) in Bangkok, Thailand, and drafted a declaration that, among other things, rejected MSC-style ecolabelling schemes.

The civil society declaration presented at the 4SSF conference eschewed MSC ecolabels because they are inherently oriented toward export markets that have sucked resource wealth out of developing countries. They fail to address the

longstanding power imbalance that leads to exploitation.

The MSC programme demands conformity, and the highest cost that small-scale fishers may end up paying for certification is the loss of cultural identity. The MSC's corporate value system, overlaid onto complex social-ecological relationships established by artisanal fishing cultures, will eventually eclipse those traditional value systems. In time, the corporate, hierarchal, 'one-size fits all' managerial model will replace the culture-based systems that have achieved sustainability by using low-impact gear, protecting resources, and sharing the wealth that healthy fisheries generate. Once invested in the MSC value system, fisheries will be inexorably drawn towards increasing capitalization and privatization. Fisheries may be sustainable, but the landscape will change radically, to the benefit of capital, not traditional fishing communities.

While most small-scale fisheries offer great potential for being practised sustainably, many suffer from overexploitation, habitat degradation, and social decay in coastal communities. In order to remain viable, these, and all fisheries, will have to change to cope with social, ecological and economic forces beyond their control. Many small-scale fisheries are export-oriented, and, in these cases, resilient and equitable consumer/producer linkages need to be forged. The MSC's pro-capital, asocial approach to sustainable fisheries will put small-scale fishers hoping to engage with the global market at a disadvantage in a new version of an old power struggle.

### **Appropriate gear**

Small-scale fishers do have choices. They can utilize regional labelling schemes to improve market visibility when appropriate. No certification system can guarantee sustainability, but experts and non-experts alike can verify the use of appropriate gear, equitable access to resources, and the cultural context of a fishery. Labels such as those being developed by the Responsible Fisheries Alliance,

which guarantee seafood produced by artisanal and small-scale fishers using low-impact or passive gear, are helping small-scale Icelandic longliners separate their products from those of the Icelandic trawler fleet (which is now seeking MSC certification). In other parts of the world, fishers are developing and supplying local markets, and receiving premiums from their neighbours in joint producer/consumer efforts to achieve sustainability at regional levels.

The MSC deserves credit for raising the issue of sustainability to a prominent place in the global seafood market, and harnessing consumer power, but its political/economic agenda will never allow it to enter the promised land of truly sustainable fisheries.

Having exhausted its credibility and its effectiveness, the MSC should surrender its role as a certification body and leave the stage. The more time the MSC spends in the spotlight, the more it dominates the discourse on sustainability, and as long as that discourse ignores social and ecosystem values, it will not serve consumers or producers.

If small-scale fishers want to identify their products in the market, they must take control of ecolabelling as a tool to certify the principles of social and environmental responsibility that lead to sustainable fisheries. These principles have created sustainable fisheries all over the world, North and South, from the Canadian weir fishery in the Bay of Fundy to artisanal fisheries in Thailand's Palian River estuary.

Fishers and their communities seldom amass financial riches when harvesting sustainably from healthy resources, but they eat well, provide food for the world, and are generally happy. Perhaps the ecolabel for small-scale fisheries practising the principles of sustainability could be a smile... with a gold tooth in it! 🦷



Ecolabelled seafood at the Red Lobster restaurant, Illinois, US. Ecolabelling should be a tool to certify the principles of social and environmental responsibility

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#### Winning with Certification, SAMUDRA Report 56

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#### "Ecolabels and Fish Trade: Marine Stewardship Council Certification and the South African Hake Industry" by Stefano Ponte

[www.4ssf.org](http://www.4ssf.org)

#### Securing Sustainable Small-scale Fisheries