

Marine Stewardship Council

An appeal for co-operation

The Marine Stewardship Council initiative will succeed only if it enlists the support of the wide array of stakeholders in fisheries

I received your note on my return from Cape Town, where we held the seventh in our first round of regional workshops on the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). The discussion there was most interesting, especially from the perspective of native South African fishers represented by the Informal Fisheries Association. They felt that the MSC, by promoting socially responsible fisheries, would help them advance the interests of small-scale, local fishers who have heretofore been disenfranchised by the South African government. Fishworkers in other parts of the world have had a similar reaction to the MSC.

With that in mind, I have to say that I've been very disappointed in your apparent unwillingness to help us develop the MSC with the interests of fishworkers at heart. ICSF seems to believe that any market-based mechanism such as the MSC will necessarily favour large-scale, Northern fisheries and their sophisticated management systems. You seem to have concluded that the MSC will work against the interests of small-scale fishers, especially in the developing world. The fact that Unilever, one of the world's leading buyers of fish, and other key industry players are co-operating in the development of the MSC seems only to have deepened your mistrust.

My mission is to turn that thinking on its head and persuade you that the MSC is worthy not only of your trust but your active participation. Let me start by making a few salient points about the evolution of the MSC in relation to the fisheries work of the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF).

1. In 1995, WWF launched the Endangered Seas Campaign in response to the accelerating decline of marine fisheries

around the world. Our goal is to reverse the effects of unsustainable fishing on marine fish and the environment on which they depend. One of our targets is to build powerful social and economic incentives for sustainable fishing that will complement existing regulatory regimes.

2. We recognized early on that the rich fishery resources of developing countries are increasingly under threat from the distant-water fleets of Northern, developed States. The FAO reported earlier this year that "in most low-income food-deficit countries, production has changed little over recent years, and, in some of them, it has dropped considerably." As you know, a leading cause of this decline has been the, activity of offshore fleets that compete with local fishers for dwindling resources.

3. To make matters worse, many Northern governments heavily subsidize their fishing fleets. This is particularly true of the European Union. Having long since overfished their own waters, these countries export their excess fishing capacity to the waters of some of the world's poorest nations. That Northern governments subsidize overfishing in developing countries is one of the most scandalous aspects of modern fisheries.

Number of fronts

4. WWF is addressing unsustainable fishing on a number of fronts: in our field and policy work, and in both public and private sectors. Our field offices around the world are focusing more and more on fisheries and the marine environment. For example, last week our affiliate in Thailand (Wildlife Fund Thailand) issued a call for action in the shooting death of an official of the Small-Scale Fishermen's Network of Phang Nga Bay by the crew of an offshore trawler.

There are many similar examples of our work on behalf of local communities from our field offices around the world.

5. Meanwhile, we are working in the public policy sector to eliminate or redirect the subsidies that send the wrong economic signals to world fisheries. We recently published a report entitled 'Subsidies and the Depletion of World Fisheries' that highlights this problem. Among the four case studies in the report is one by Gareth Porter of the World Bank featuring the impacts of EU fisheries agreements with African States. We released this report in early June at a joint news conference and workshop in Geneva co-sponsored by the United Nations Environment Programme. The conclusions of the workshop and the publicity surrounding the WWF report stimulated tremendous interest and controversy around the world.

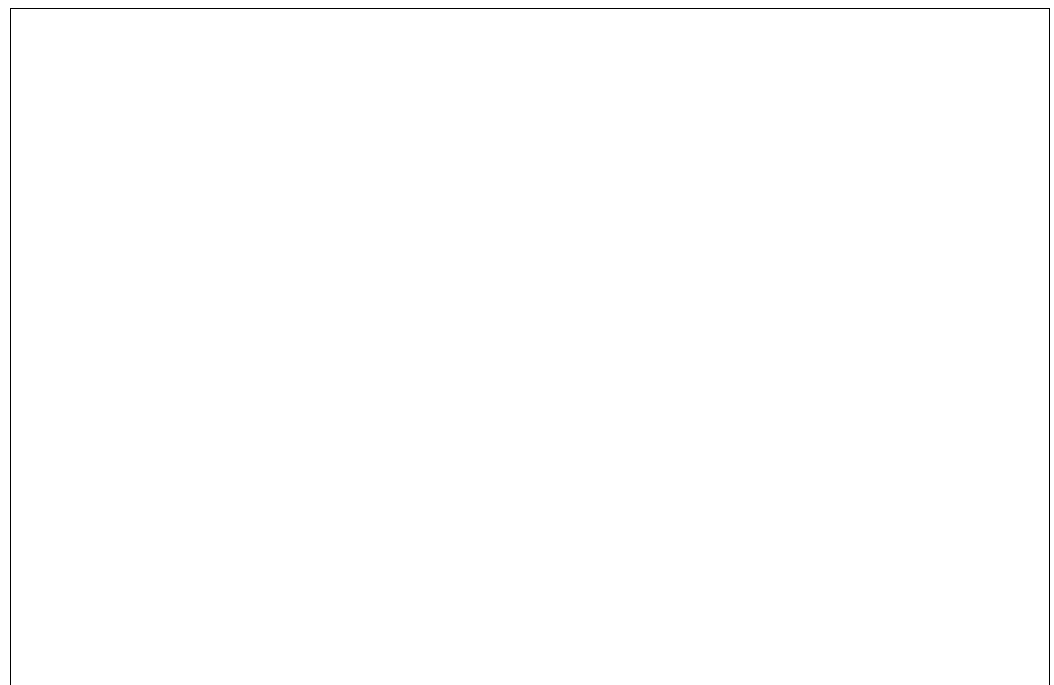
6. The debate over subsidies was particularly intense in Brussels. Gareth Porter and Scott Burns (editor of the WWF report) briefed senior EU officials there last month and also met with Brian O'Riordan and Coalition for Fair Fisheries Agreements (CFFA). The European Commission was quick to defend its record of spending more than one-third of the EU's annual fisheries budget securing access for European fleets to the waters of developing countries. Ironically, in the

month following the release of our report, the EU announced the renewal of fisheries agreements with three west African countries (Guinea-Bissau, Cote d'Ivoire and Cape Verde). In each case, the agreements provided for an increase in the number of EU vessels allowed to fish in the waters of these developing nations. We're planning a follow-up report for early next year.

7. In addition to our work on subsidies and other issues in the public sector, WWF is increasingly working on complementary initiatives in the private sector. We launched the MSC in 1996 as a private sector partnership to promote the conservation and sustainable use of fisheries. The MSC represents an innovative new approach designed to create powerful economic incentives for sustainable fishing by harnessing market forces and the power of consumer choice. Through independent, third-party certification of fisheries and labelling of seafood products, the MSC will give consumers the ability to choose products from sustainable sources. For the first time, both corporate and individual seafood buyers will be able to identify and select products from well-managed, sustainable fisheries.

Independent organization

8. The MSC was established as an independent organization in February 1997. Its stated mission is "to work for



sustainable marine fisheries by promoting responsible, environmentally appropriate, socially beneficial and economically viable fisheries practices, while maintaining the biodiversity, productivity and ecological processes of the marine environment.”

From the outset, we recognized the importance of the ‘socially responsible’ element of that mission statement. Accordingly, we invited social scientists and experts on Southern fisheries, such as Daniel Pauly, Bob Johannes, Madeleine Hall-Arber and Matt Gianni, to a workshop in September 1996 to draft the principles and criteria for sustainable fishing that will eventually underpin the MSC. The resulting draft contains five principles, one of which deals explicitly with social issues in fisheries. We need your help to improve on the original draft.

9. To enhance the transparency of the MSC, we have held a series of formal and informal consultations around the world since last year. These workshops and meetings have given us invaluable feedback on a number of issues, especially the draft principles and criteria. The workshops allow us to - interact with stakeholders from diverse backgrounds.

While newsletters (of which the MSC has published three) and websites are a

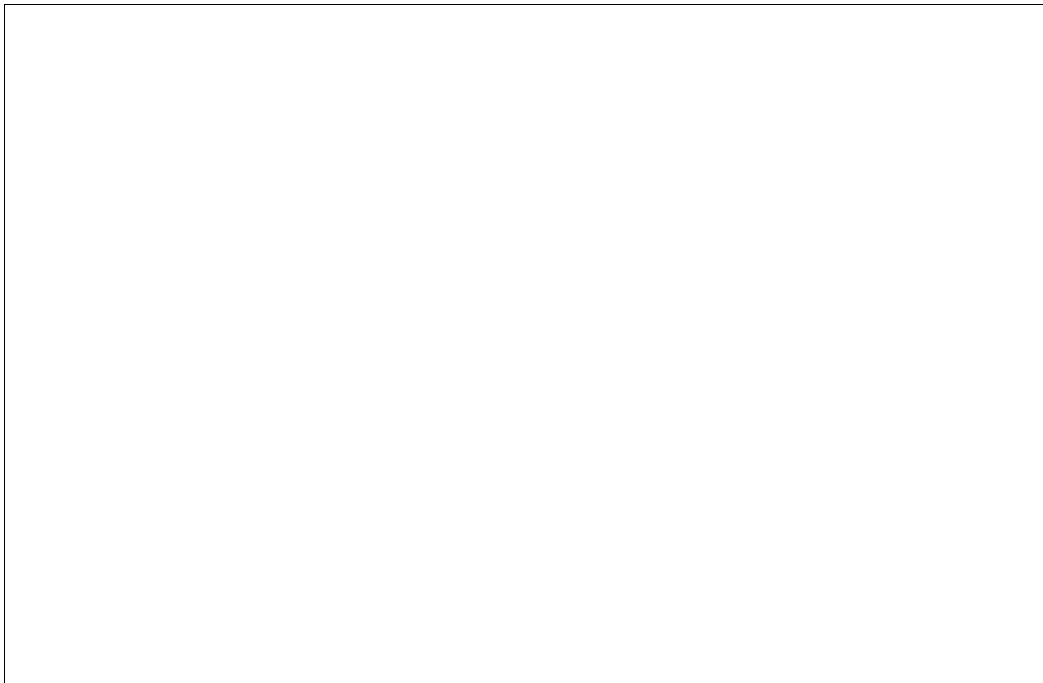
valuable means to disseminate information, we’ve found there is no substitute for face-to-face meetings and workshops where perspectives and ideas can be freely exchanged.

10. One of our foremost concerns has been the potential impact of the MSC on small-scale fishers and fisheries in developing countries. According to the FAO, products from fisheries in the developing world are increasingly being exported to Northern markets. That being the case, market mechanisms like the MSC have the potential to help promote more sustainable fishing practices in both the North and South alike.

In fact, certification under the auspices of the MSC could actually result in a market advantage for Southern fisheries over their Northern counterparts. After all, most of the spectacular collapses of fisheries have occurred in the North, not the South! For example, certification could provide a competitive edge for coastal fisheries over rival distant-water fleets operating offshore. This aspect of the MSC needs to be more fully explored in discussions with ICSF members.

Level playing ground

11. The MSC workshops have emphasized the need to make certification available to all fisheries around the world on an equal basis. Global equivalency—or a ‘level playing field’—will not only be extremely



important for the success of the MSC, but is also a legal requirement under the rules of the World Trade Organization.

The World Bank and a number of bilateral aid agencies have already demonstrated their willingness to provide support to allow small-scale operators in the developing world to become certified under the auspices of the Forest Stewardship Council (FSC). Frankly, we believe more small-scale fisheries are likely to qualify for initial certification than large-scale enterprises. This has certainly been the experience of the FSC, which has overseen the certification of far more hectares of well-managed forest in developing countries than in Northern, developed States. In the North, small-scale forest operators have banded together in co-operatives and sought certification together, sometimes assisted by their governments. We believe the same is likely to happen in small-scale, Northern fisheries.

12. In any case, we must ensure that the MSC is shaped so that it favours sustainable, small-scale fisheries, especially those in developing countries. To facilitate this, WWF and the MSC are planning a series of formal and informal consultations in the developing world during 1997-98. We have received a small grant from a Swiss-based charitable foundation for the expansion of the MSC in Latin America. However, we will need to reach out to Africa and especially Asia and the Pacific as well. We need your help to ensure that we reach the appropriate stakeholders in each region. That's why, for example, we have sought to schedule a workshop in conjunction with the ICSF meeting in February.

13. Another subject on which we need your input is the proposed governance of the MSC itself. As you know, we were originally advised to choose a non-membership model, with a board of directors and a consultative forum to ensure sufficient representation and inclusiveness of all stakeholders.

This has been the subject of intense discussion at each MSC workshop, and we have received excellent advice on how the MSC should be governed. For example,

most workshop participants have advised that the MSC board should NOT be representative or expertise-based, but should be composed of individuals of the highest possible integrity, credibility and 'statesmanship' who are committed to the cause of fisheries conservation. We need your feedback and that of your members on the proposed governance model as well.

14. Finally, I'm pleased to report that support for the MSC is growing among all stakeholder groups. To date, dozens of stakeholder organizations have registered their support, including NGOs, fish processors, retailers, fishers' groups, academic institutions and government research institutions. Influencing the behaviour of industry is obviously key to any market-led initiative like the MSC.

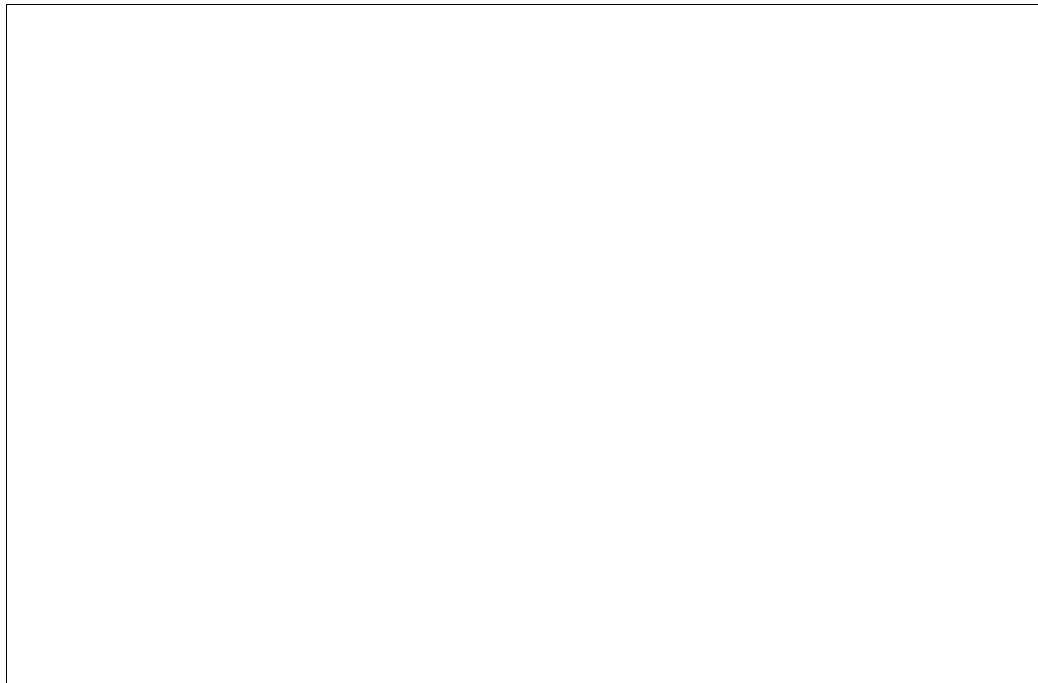
Without their support, we're simply trying to influence the market from outside. And if we're successful in changing the way industry does business, we could have an enormous effect on world fisheries.

Our challenge is to establish the most rigorous, defensible certification and labelling system possible, and then let it go to work. Frankly, I'm happy to have the support of progressive elements of industry in the MSC initiative. We must not allow the involvement of multinationals like Unilever in the MSC scare us away from a process that will lead to fundamental reform of an industry! That industry is involved is all the more reason that NGOs like WWF and ICSF must be part of the initiative, to help ensure that the emerging organization addresses the issues that we believe are most important. In the long run, that's the only way we can guarantee its credibility and success.

I believe ICSF has done itself and the MSC a great disservice by refusing to actively engage in the development of the organization. So far, you've rebuffed our efforts to schedule a workshop in conjunction with an ICSF event such as your triennial meeting.

Misconceptions

The articles in SAMUDRA have been full of rhetoric and misconceptions that reflect a lack of information and understanding



about the MSC. Magazine articles represent one-way communication and don't amount to constructive engagement. In the spirit of mutual understanding and co-operation, may I suggest an alternative course of action?

First, by all means continue the debate in SAMUDRA. But don't believe that this alone amounts to effective consultation! You are most welcome to print any or all of this message in the magazine, as you wish.

Second, work with us to schedule a workshop on the MSC in conjunction with the ICSF triennial meeting in February or another appropriate gathering.

We're committed to reaching out to small-scale fishers and fishworkers around the world. But we don't have an unlimited budget and can't visit every country. A workshop in conjunction meeting would allow us to reach many more stakeholders than we could otherwise.

Finally, consider serving on the board or consultative forum of the MSC when they are established some time later this year or early next year. That way, you'll have a voice in the governance and development of the MSC, And the MSC will have the benefit of your input and perspective on fisheries around the world.

I hope that this note has helped clear the way for a more positive and active role for ICSF in the development of the MSC. If the MSC evolves in a manner that does not take the perspective of small-scale fishers and those in developing countries into account, you and I will have only ourselves to hold accountable. Please don't hesitate to contact me if I can provide any further information. I look forward to hearing from you soon. 📧

This letter was written by Michael Sutton, Director, Endangered Seas Campaign, WWF International