

'Sustainable fishing' certification too lenient and discretionary, study finds

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The certification of seafood as "sustainable" by the nonprofit Marine Stewardship Council is too lenient and discretionary, a study by a consortium of researchers has found.

"When consumers want sustainable fish there are two options to meet the demand: [fisheries](#) can become more sustainable or the definition of sustainable can be watered down to be practically meaningless—with MSC seafood, the definition has been repeatedly watered down," said Jennifer Jacquet, a clinical assistant professor in New York University's Environmental Studies Program and one of 11 authors of the study, which appears in the journal *Biological Conservation*.

The expansion of fishing in the oceans—further offshore, deeper, and for different species—has led to the depletion of many marine fish populations. In response, market-based efforts aimed at consumers, which include "eco-labeling," have emerged to change demand. Among these was the establishment of the London-based Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) in 1997. A joint project between [World Wildlife Fund](#) and Unilever, MSC was created as a conservation tool—intended to provide "the best environmental choice in seafood" to consumers and to create positive incentives that would improve the status and management of fisheries.

However, conservation groups have raised concerns about MSC's certification process, calling into question the organization's claim that its eco-labeling program is "the best environmental choice in seafood."

Its certification process is paid for by the fisheries, with rates dependent on the size and complexity of the fishery. MSC estimates that most certifications cost between \$15,000 and \$120,000. Since its founding, MSC has attached its certified label to more than 170 fisheries, with fishery clients spending between \$2.3 and \$18.7 million on certification.

To gauge the [viability](#) of MSC's labeling program, the researchers examined 19 formal objections—raised primarily by environmental groups and amounting to one-third, by weight, of all MSC-certified seafood—to certifications MSC has granted to fisheries for Chilean sea bass, Antarctic krill, and others. Objections are heard by an independent adjudicator appointed by MSC. In all but one of these 19 cases, the certification was upheld.

In the *Biological Conservation* analysis, the researchers sought to determine whether these fisheries, in fact, met the MSC's principles for certification.

The MSC uses three major principles that third-party certifiers interpret in determining whether a fishery is "sustainable" and may use the MSC label: sustainability of the target fish stock; low impacts on the ecosystem; and effective management. However, the researchers found many of these fisheries—representing 35 percent of eco-labeled seafood—did not meet MSC standards.

For instance, the longline fishery for swordfish in Canada appears to violate the "low impacts on the ecosystem" principle. This fishery has high levels of bycatch—sea life accidentally caught in pursuit of other fish. The targeted catch of 20,000 swordfish per year results in bycatch of approximately 100,000 sharks as well as 1,200 endangered loggerhead and 170 critically endangered leatherback turtles.

"The MSC's narrow definition of sustainability is out of step with the

general public perception of what that term means," said Claire Christian, one of the study's co-authors and a policy analyst at the Antarctic and Southern [Ocean](#) Coalition. "When the MSC labels a swordfish fishery that catches more sharks than swordfish 'sustainable,' it's time to re-evaluate its standards."

The Alaska pollock fishery, one of the largest fisheries in the US, also received MSC certification even though, the researchers noted, several court rulings had determined that the fishery was not in compliance with national law—an indication that it didn't meet MSC's "effective management" principle.

The authors believe the MSC needs to enforce the principles it created for certified fisheries. Otherwise, consumers believe they are buying "the best environmental choice" in seafood, when in fact there is a very good chance they are not.

More information: [www.sciencedirect.com/science/ ...
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