Blue tick of sustainability or greenwashing of large-scale fisheries?

WORLD OCEAN INITIATIVE
SEP 14TH 2020

Familiar to consumers in over 100 countries worldwide, the Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC) blue tick label is, on the face of it, synonymous with ethical consumption and sustainable fishing.

The MSC was launched in 1997 by conservation organisation WWF and consumer-goods giant Unilever to tackle unsustainable fishing practices. It aims to transform the seafood market by recognising and rewarding sustainable fishing practices through its certification programme.

Certified fisheries can market their products using the MSC's ecolabel to influence consumer choice. Over the years supermarkets, retailers and even whole countries have pledged to source all seafood products from fisheries certified by the MSC, considerably extending its influence. Nearly 500 fisheries around the world are either MSC-certified or under its assessment programme, collectively landing 16% of the world's wild-caught fish each year.

However, as the MSC's reach has grown, so has disquiet among some scientists and campaign groups, who have become disillusioned with the sustainability claims of the organisation. Even co-founder WWF has expressed disappointment in the programme.

Inclusive certification?

In May campaign group Bloom published a strongly-worded report on what it called the "sham" of the MSC label, claiming that it greenwashed industrial fishing by deliberately highlighting small-scale fisheries in marketing to improve its image with consumers. In fact, the proportion of MSC-certified fish caught by small vessels had declined from almost 70% in late 2000 to an average of 8% since 2009, it said.

Indonesian tuna handliner fisher, MSC Ocean Stewardship-funded project (image credit: International Pole and Line Foundation)

Its research revealed that 83% of certified fish were caught by industrial-sized fisheries, some of which use controversial practices including bottom-trawling and fish-aggregating devices. It analysed MSC's promotional materials and its international Facebook page and found that 47% of illustrations featured small-scale fisheries—boats less than 12 metres long which do not operate bottom trawls or dredges—while industrial fishing was featured in 32% of photographs.

The MSC disputes the findings of Bloom's research, which it says does not take into account small-scale fisheries that are at the pre-certification stage. Although of the total 409 certified fisheries, 62 are small-scale fisheries, it is also working with around 100 others on sustainability improvements with an eye to future certification.

"We support fisheries with training so they have a better awareness of our standard, and what they need to do to become certified," says Oluyemisi Oloruntuyi, the MSC's head of accessibility. Bloom's research only used one of MSC's several social-media accounts as a source for its data on illustrations of industrial or small-scale fisheries, she adds.

But the International Pole and Line Foundation (IPNLF), which works with small-scale tuna fisheries, is also critical of the lack of small operators in the MSC's programme. "[The MSC's] mission is to drive ocean conservation, but you can only really do that if you are working efficiently with all sectors, not just large industrial fisheries," says Martin Purves, IPNLF's managing director.

Pricing small fisheries out

The cost of certification is a huge barrier to small-scale fisheries, according to Mr Purves, who worked for the MSC for eight years. "Some of the fisheries we work with cannot afford to be certified, which immediately puts them at a disadvantage in terms of market access because some retailers are specifically focusing sourcing on MSC certification," he says.

The MSC estimates the cost of certification at US$15,000-120,000, depending on the size of the fishery. Once certified, there are also ongoing costs for the fishery, including an annual audit by the certifying body (which the MSC says is unlikely to cost less than US$3,000). The fishery may also need to invest in improvements to meet MSC requirements. Every five years, the fishery must be recertified.

Industrial fisheries offset these costs against the price premium they can obtain for certified products, but this is much more difficult for small, lower-volume fisheries, unless they are selling a premium product such as lobster, Mr Purves maintains.

Corrective action

The MSC is currently undertaking its five-yearly review of its standard, which consists of consultations on a wide range of issues before changes are confirmed in 2022. It acknowledges that the standard is challenging for small-scale fisheries to achieve and is aiming to simplify the process, for example by reducing the number of questions that fisheries are scored against to meet criteria under its performance indicators, Ms Oloruntuyi says.

It has launched a programme to support small-scale fisheries, and fisheries in developing countries, to achieve certification. This year, six projects in Indonesia, Mexico and South Africa received up to £50,000 (US$64,000) each, which they will use over the next two years to support investments in improvements required by the MSC. There is also a fund to help them with the costs of recertification.

Mussels fishery in South Africa (image credit: MSC)

A common issue that small-scale fisheries need to fix is a lack of data, which the MSC's science-based programme requires as evidence that fisheries are meeting its sustainability criteria. "That is the strength of our programme, it gives us credibility and trust, but collection of data can be a constraint for small-scale fisheries," Ms Oloruntuyi says.

One area where a lack of data can hinder certification for small-scale fisheries is accurate tracking of fishing trips. Without expensive in-vessel monitoring systems, it can be hard for them to prove they were not fishing in an illegal location.

In August, the MSC launched a hackathon to find a way that satellite technology could be used to track small fishing vessels cheaply. Innovators have been challenged to make the solution accessible to artisanal fishers in developing countries, using existing technology and infrastructure where possible.

"Small-scale fisheries provide food security and livelihood for millions of people around the world, so it's important to our mission that they are part of our work," Ms Oloruntuyi says.

Main image: Madagascar octopus fishery in Tulear MSC Pathway Project (credit: MSC)