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WWF: Sustainable-Seafood Label MSC Needs Reform



MSC headquarters, London (Geograph / Stephen Richards)

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In 1997, the World Wildlife Fund joined with the conglomerate Unilever to create an independent certification group for seafood, the Marine Stewardship Council. MSC has grown over the decades, and its well-recognized [blue logo](#) now covers about \$5 billion in annual sales. As a measure of the NGO's prominence, mega-chains McDonalds and Walmart only sell MSC-certified fish in their EU and North American locations. Last year, MSC CEO Rupert Howes set the organization's sights on growth, suggesting that its certification program should cover fully one-third of the world's take by 2030.

However, some environmental organizations suggest that MSC's ability to ensure sustainability has not kept pace with its expansion. On Thursday, WWF joined others in calling for reform at MSC, warning that the group "needs to commit to and accelerate key reforms so that it can maintain its reputation as the world's leading fisheries standard and certification system." Greenpeace, the Environmental Justice Foundation and others published a more strongly-worded statement in late January, alleging that MSC is "allowing fisheries with widely unacceptable impacts to be certified."

The key to reform at MSC, WWF suggested, would be changes in governance. The NGO called for:

- *Additional oversight and procedures to ensure that peer reviewer and stakeholder comments are fully resolved, and that decisions, especially those that are scientifically-contested, are grounded in the strongest possible checks and balances.*
- *Impartial, objective and client-independent conformity assessment bodies (CABs) using sound science and specific knowledge to justify evaluation scoring.*
- *The use of the precautionary principle as the basis for conformity assessment decisions where data are lacking.*
- *The opportunity for independent scientific review of a CAB's scoring decision and justifications where there is clear controversy and/or competing scientific and knowledge analysis.*

In addition, it called for specific changes to MSC's standards, including:

- *A five-year time limit for fisheries certified with conditions (certified fisheries that do not fully meet MSC's standard) to make needed improvements.*
- *Access to 24/7 fishing vessel tracking data.*
- *Stronger safety and working condition requirements for fishing boat crews and observers, with compliance certified by more than voluntary disclosure.*
- *A prohibition on purposefully targeting marine mammals to facilitate fishing activities.*
- *A requirement for MSC-certified fisheries to minimize unwanted bycatch and discards.*

Prof. Daniel Pauly, an outspoken expert on global fisheries at the University of British Columbia, suggested that WWF's call for change isn't surprising. "In the two decades since it was created, the MSC has been steadily drifting away from its original mission, i.e., to serve as a bridge between the fishing industry and the conservation community, and certified more and more blatantly unsustainable fisheries," he said. "That the WWF has to remind them of that . . . illustrates the problem."

Internally, WWF has fielded concerns about MSC before. In 2016, an unauthorized draft document leaked from World Wildlife Fund described circumstantial evidence that MSC could be improperly influenced by its arrangements with the fishing industry. The 0.5 percent take that MSC receives from the value of its certified catch could be creating "a conflict with MSC's role as an independent and impartial standard-setting body," the draft document asserted. The organization derives most of its revenue from this percentage, and took in about \$20 million in licensing fees last year. The unauthorized report noted that MSC has "aggressively pursued global scale growth" with an attendant increase in revenue in recent years. An MSC spokesman expressed disappointment with the report's claims.

In a statement Friday, MSC asserted that its evaluations are "independent and impartial," and it said that any changes to its program would occur through a stakeholder process with input from fisheries, NGOs and government. "Stakeholder engagement in the assessment process ensures that all relevant information is taken into account and maintains the credibility of the eventual determination. Inevitably stakeholders do not always agree," MSC wrote.

"MSC and WWF work with many of the same partners. MSC remains committed to positive, solutions-orientated collaboration with all stakeholders who share our vision of healthy and productive oceans," said CEO Rupert Howes. "Given the pressures and demands on our ocean resources, it is essential that NGOs, governments, retailers and industry work together to accelerate the delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals. This will require a pragmatic approach, building consensus on how to best achieve our mutual aims."

Link: <https://www.maritime-executive.com/article/wwf-top-sustainable-seafood-label-needs-reform#gs.ao1rSKw>