



MSC label faces scrutiny over big fishing



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The leading label for certified sustainable fish has been criticised by a new report for certifying some of the world's biggest industrial fisheries and misleading use of imagery.

The report, published by the science journal *Plos* and commissioned by French NGO Bloom, has highlighted the proportion of large-scale fisheries certified by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), and claimed that the majority of imagery put out by MSC is not representative of this.

According to the MSC, 16 per cent of its certified fishers are small-scale. The report, by researchers affiliated with the University of New York and Canada's Dalhousie University, analysed 399 images used by MSC since 2009 and found that 49 per cent depicted small-scale vessels.

It concluded that the label "disproportionately features photographs of small-scale fisheries although the catch it certifies is overwhelmingly from industrial fisheries."

The MSC has refuted the claims of misleading imagery as "wholly untrue" and an inadequate method of analysis, but the report has shone a light on the scale of fishing that is certified by the organisation.

Bloom and the report authors state that MSC is certifying "the most impactful fishing methods that exist in the world, such as bottom trawls and dredges", which accounted for 83 per cent of the MSC-certified catches between 2009 and 2017.

On the other hand, MSC insists that to improve the sustainability of fishing on a global scale, all sizes of fishery must be able to apply for certification.



An estimated 15 per cent of the global fishing catch is certified by MSC. Image MSC.

"Bloom implies that 'industrial fishing' is always destructive. This gives an over-simplistic image," a spokesperson for MSC told Wicked Leeks.

"Small boats can certainly evoke a feeling of low impact. However, in order to truly test the sustainability of fishing, all aspects must be considered, rather than focusing on single aspects such as scale or fishing method alone. Just because a fishery is deemed to be 'large' does not mean it cannot be sustainable," the spokesperson said.

However, in the report's summary by Bloom, authors list damaging fishing methods that can be certified by the MSC due to this policy, including deep sea bottom trawling, claiming that: "the MSC has turned into an additional weapon for crushing small-scale coastal fishing by industrial fishing and mass retail."

Overfishing and 'window dressing'

MSC-certified fisheries are monitored against three principles, which include a benchmark for the population size of fish stocks to prevent overfishing. These benchmarks are set according to Total Allowable Catch (TAC) quotas set by international fishery ministers, and which have themselves been criticised for a lack of transparency and failing to halt overfishing.

Founder of Cornish sustainable fish wholesaler, Fish for Thought, Paul Trudgian, said the report makes him "challenge whether MSC is right for our business."

"We were the first company in our sector to sign up for MSC because it felt like a step in the right direction, because there is no one-step-fix-all," said Trudgian, who can only use his MSC label on hake and sardines, as they are separately also certified by the label. Fish for Thought relies more closely on the local Cornwall Good Seafood Guide to catch species that are sustainable in that area.

"I can see why they're critical of some of the catch methods, and I do think some of the criticism needs to be addressed," he said.

"The issue I would take, is that not all large boats are unsustainable. You've got the MSC on one hand with a little photo of a line-caught mackerel, and this report on the other side with a boat of the size we've never seen in UK waters. It's not black and white for me, in my experience it's always grey. The truth is always in between."

But he added: "This kind of report makes me stop and think and makes me review our membership of MSC, which we do every year."

"The reason I got into this sector was because I thought there wasn't enough being done, and there is an awful lot of 'window dressing'. It makes me challenge whether MSC is right for our business," he said.

Size: does it matter?

One of the MSC's justifications for certifying larger fisheries is that all sizes of fishery must be included to tackle global overfishing.

Around half of the world's seafood catch for human consumption is caught by small fisheries, which in turn account for 90 per cent of fishers, according to the MSC figures.

When asked by Wicked Leeks, MSC said it does not have a specific target to increase its certified percentage of small fishers, which currently account for 16 per cent of its total landed catch in tonnage. Instead it said it has a target to "engage" 30 per cent of the global fishing industry, which includes small fisheries.

"The percentage of small-scale fisheries achieving MSC certification is currently around 16 per cent. However, this does not reflect the breadth of the MSC's work to support these fisheries," a spokesperson said. "We provide small-scale fisheries with funding, training and tools to help them improve their sustainability."



*MSC certifies all sizes of fishery including the largest, including this 144m-long vessel.
Image Bloom report/Pierre Gleizes.*

Trudgian, who believes sustainable fishing relies on a diversity of species and a transparent route back to the fisher, location and catch method, said: "I know a lot of small fisheries down here who are sustainable but not certified. It's not always needed. In Cornwall, it's a much more fragmented industry with up to 60 species landed."

What will help is consumer pressure for more transparency, better knowledge of different fish species, and 'challenger' brands who are committed to doing things differently, he said.

Even if small fisheries do attain the MSC label, the fact it also certifies larger vessels with potentially damaging fishing methods will always raise concerns, believes Trudgian.

"The problem that MSC has, as long as they're going to countenance certifying the industrial boats, people will always look at it and ask 'are they only doing it because they're a big fishery who can afford to pay?' A normal human would look at it and say that cannot be good for our oceans.

"It's an enormous complicated global organisation now – if this report is scrutinising it and holding them to account, that's a good thing. The key is it's a talking point, and having a debate about it, and that, in and of itself, is a good thing."

Tips for sustainable fish [Source Bloom]:

1. Reduce your intake of animal protein, including fish.
2. Ask your fishmonger that the fishing method is clearly displayed — it is the law in Europe — and that the length of the vessel is also displayed.
3. Buy fish from small-scale coastal fishing: vessels under 12 meters and using passive gears (line, trap, net, on-foot fishing).
4. If you remain unsure about the way the fish was caught, don't buy it (and if you feel like it, make your dissatisfaction known).
5. Diversify your plate. Exit farmed salmon and tropical shrimp, reduce cod. Buy little-valued but very good fish such hake, Norway pout, blue whiting, anchovies or sardines.