



Report reveals staggering scale of MSC's fishing industry greenwash - Greenpeace

Friday, 8 May, 2020 - 09:05

Statement from Greenpeace:

One of the world's most recognisable sustainability certifications, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) tick, has been exposed for the sham that it is, says Greenpeace, in a new report from environmental NGO Bloom.

Researchers, who looked at every MSC certified fish catch between 2009 and 2017, revealed that a whopping 83% was caught using environmentally destructive fishing methods like bottom trawling, dredging and purse seining.

Jessica Desmond, oceans campaigner at Greenpeace, says this is further proof that MSC labels are a sham now used to deceive consumers into thinking they're buying sustainable products.

"The MSC tick has been revealed for what it really is: an exercise in fishing industry greenwash," she says.

"The fishing industry is painting their public face green while below the waterline they continue to profit from industrial-scale ocean destruction via bottom trawling.

"Seafood New Zealand uses MSC certifications as proof they are looking after our ocean, and major NZ fishing companies Talley's and Sanfords proudly tout their labels too. It's a dishonest representation of the impact catching these fish is having on our ocean."

As well as assessing the percentage of fish caught through environmentally damaging means, the report also reviewed the communications put out by MSC over the same period.

And despite the vast majority of certifications going to industrial, high-impact fisheries, and only a tiny percentage going to small, low-impact fisheries (7% of the total), these small fisheries were hugely over-represented in MSC's visual communications, representing them 47% of the time.

Desmond says it's clear the deceit is deliberate.

"Peel back the label and it's very obvious what's going on. MSC are giving industrial scale fisheries the thumbs up out at sea where we can't see them, while painting a romanticised vision of their industry for the public," she says.

"It's an example of the big guys - of large-scale industrial fishing - giving a terrible name to small operations who are genuinely exercising ocean stewardship. In fact according to the report, these small operations are the only ones who'd pass a genuine test of sustainability."

Further details in the report pointed out that fishing companies employ and pay the people that certify them, raising serious questions about impartiality.

Desmond says commercial fishing both locally and internationally needs to be better regulated to ensure the future health of the ocean.

"The industrial fishing industry seems to think it can play its own judge and jury. They want to set their own rules, monitor themselves, and then to quite literally give themselves a big tick for sustainability at the end. It's not fair for people who are trying to make more sustainable choices.

"The latest science shows ocean recovery is possible, but we need to be honest about the state it's in and start acting to rectify it. Pretending fishing practices are more sustainable than they really are paints an incomplete picture, and delays urgent moves to protect them."

--

Statement in response...

Anne Gabriel, Programme Director, Oceania and Singapore at the Marine Stewardship Council:

The paper published in Plos One referenced by Greenpeace NZ fails to consider the full breadth of the MSC's work and the diversity of the fishing sector.

The main accusation is that the MSC has used imagery to present a false picture of our work to the world. This is wholly untrue. We do not consider analysis of the photographs used on the MSC's Facebook account to be a relevant or credible indicator for evaluating a science-based certification programme. The MSC works with and promotes sustainability for all types and sizes of fisheries. This is vital if we are to address the global challenge of overfishing.

The percentage of small-scale fisheries achieving MSC certification (currently around 16%) does not reflect the breadth of the MSC's work to support these fisheries. Given their social, economic and environmental importance, we provide small-scale fisheries with funding, training and tools to help them improve their sustainability. It may take many years for most to achieve certification, but we're focused on the long-term.

As anyone working in this sector will understand, the sustainability of a fishery is not determined by its size or fishing gear. All fishing gear can have negative impacts on marine biodiversity if poorly managed. The important thing is to make sure that whatever the gear and the size of the boat, it is managed and used in such a way as to respect stocks, habitats and all the surrounding marine species. These are two of the three pillars of our standard that fisheries must meet to be MSC certified.

The social and economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic underline the importance of balancing the needs of businesses, fishermen and citizens within the limits of what our planet can sustain. The MSC has spent the past 20 years working together with the entire fishing industry, scientists, government and NGOs to strike this balance. Our ultimate objective is for all fishing to be sustainable. This is why we work with fisheries of all sizes: from the smallest to the largest.

The social and economic impacts of the coronavirus pandemic underline the importance of balancing the needs of businesses, fishermen and citizens within the limits of what our planet can sustain. The MSC has spent the past 20 years working together with the entire fishing industry, scientists, government and NGOs to strike this balance. Our ultimate objective is for all fishing to be sustainable. This is why we work with fisheries of all sizes: from the smallest to the largest.

The MSC complies with the highest levels of credibility, transparency and best practice in standards setting. This has been demonstrated through our compliance to the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organisation's guidelines for certification and ecolabelling and ISEAL codes for standard setting, assurance and impacts. In 2019, the UK government enquiry into Sustainable Seas found the MSC is the "most rigorous certification in the seafood sector" and a study on behalf of the Dutch Ministry of Agriculture, Nature and Food Quality ranked MSC in the top 10 sustainable food labels in the Netherlands. These reviews take a far more comprehensive review of the MSC's practices than the report presented by Bloom.

To conclude, seafood which carries the blue MSC label comes from fisheries which have been independently scrutinised by experts as meeting internationally recognised standards of best practice in sustainable fishing, no matter where it came from.