

French NGO Accuses MSC Of Label Fraud

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A new study is accusing the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) of creating a false 'guilt-free' reality to fit the desire of consumers who are increasingly concerned about their tuna and seafood purchases' environmental impact. MSC has strongly denied the accusations.

The report entitled, *Small is Beautiful, but Large is Certified*, was conducted by researchers from the French NGO BLOOM, New York University in the US, and Dalhousie University in Canada. Megan Bailey, one of the authors of the study is a partner in the *On The Hook* campaign, which was launched by a group of small pole-and-line tuna fishing companies and has targeted MSC in the past.

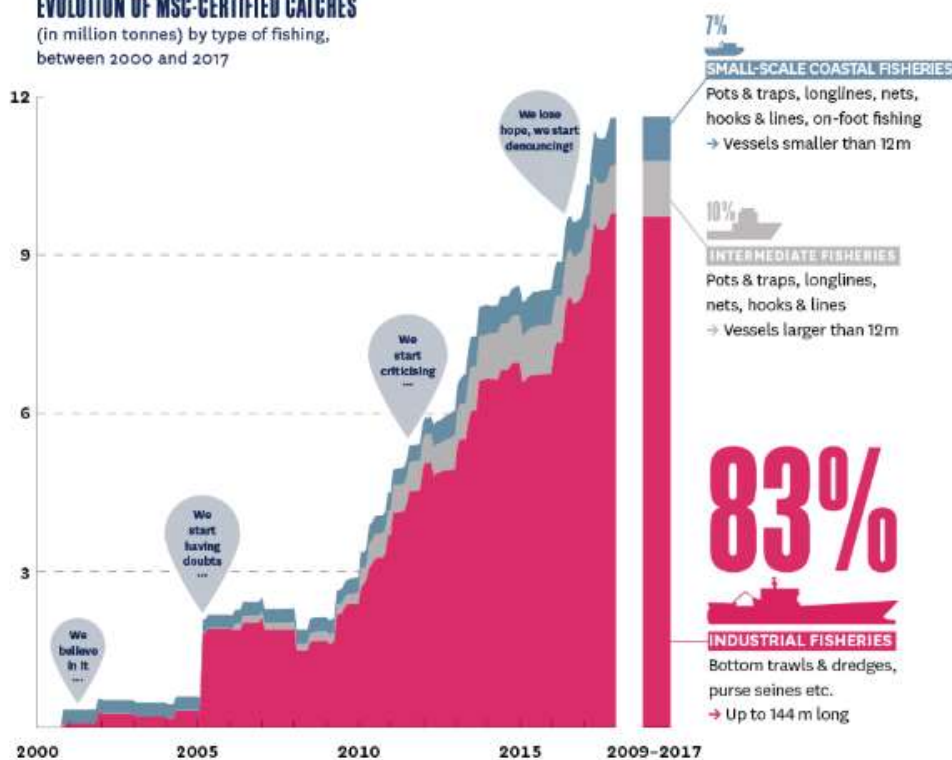
The researchers' goal was to look into whether the MSC was accurately representing its certified fisheries in its promotional materials. To do this, they compared the fisheries the MSC used in its promotional materials (reports and on Facebook) to all the MSC-certified fisheries.

The team found that a total of 11.6 million M/T of MSC certified catch from 210 fisheries was harvested until 2017. From this figure, 9.8 and 10.7 million M/T originated from fisheries using active gears and operating large-scale vessels, respectively.

The results also showed that from 2009, large industrial vessels and active gear catches – purse seine, pelagic trawls, bottom trawls – accounted for 93 and 83 percent of MSC certified volume, respectively. In contrast, small-scale vessels and passive gear – longlines, pole-and-lines, and handlines – accounted for only 7 and 17 percent, respectively.

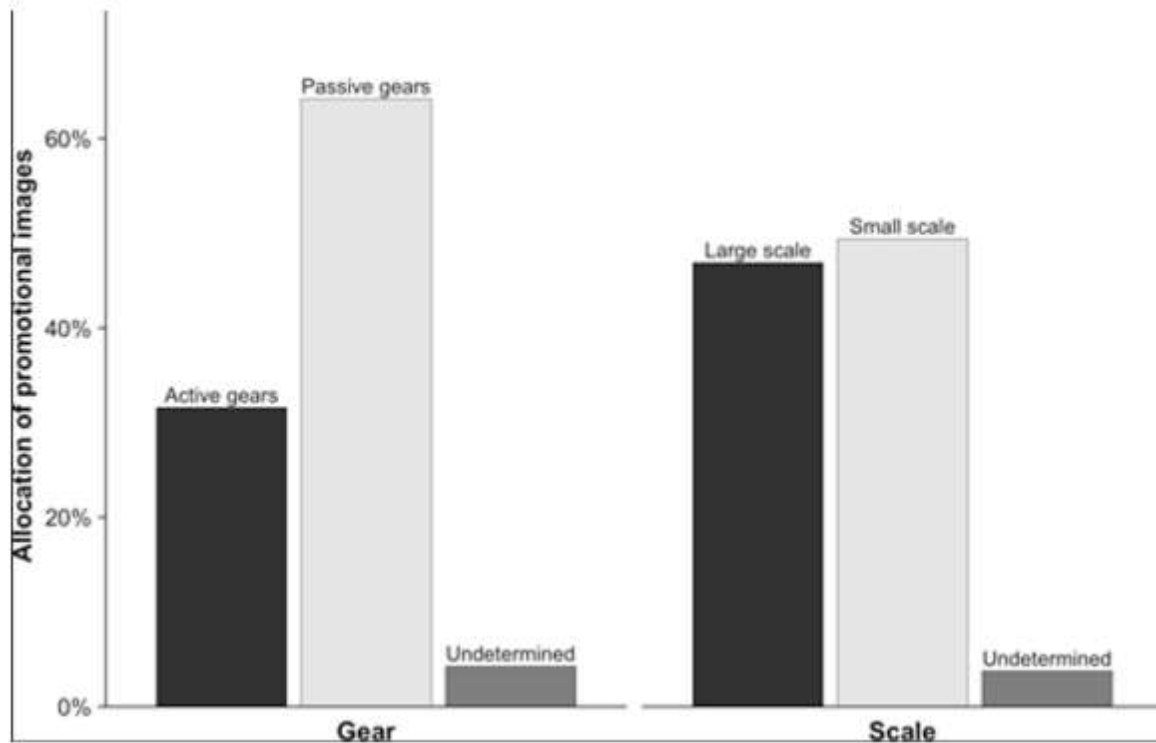
EVOLUTION OF MSC-CERTIFIED CATCHES

(in million tonnes) by type of fishing, between 2000 and 2017

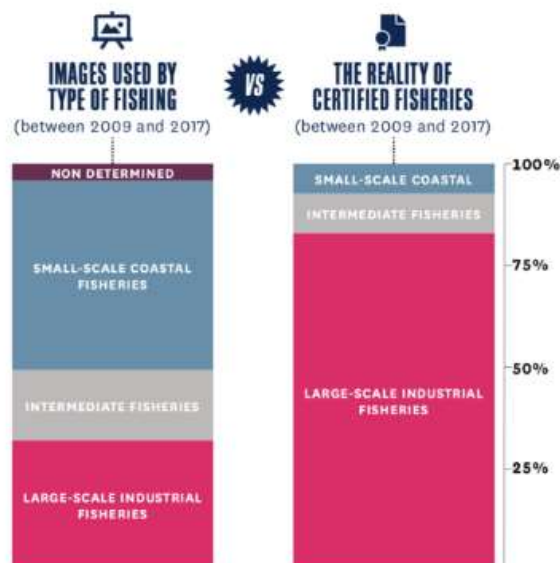


Active gears, which are mainly used by industrial fisheries only represented 32 percent of the promotional material despite being the majority of MSC certified fisheries, claimed the study. Passive gear images accounted for 64 percent of the total.

"The majority of MSC certified fisheries use active fishing gear and large-scale vessels (in either North America or Europe), which stands in stark contrast with how the MSC visually represents itself in promotional materials," stated the report.



Frédéric Le Manach, BLOOM's Scientific Director and lead author of the study, said that the "results unequivocally reveal the extent of the MSC label fraud: in stark contrast with its affirmations, the MSC label in fact mostly certifies industrial, destructive fisheries."



The report also stated that "it appears that the MSC strongly appeals to the idealization of fisheries by consumers and policy-makers by promoting fisheries involving small-scale gears and passive gears in much higher proportions than in reality."

The team hypothesized that maybe MSC is trying to appeal to the needs and desires of its consumers, providing them with the symbolic satisfaction of not having harmed the environment. Although they identified this as risky as it could cause "misunderstanding for those who scroll quickly through their documents and websites, which may explain to some extent the positive public image of the MSC."

Considering that MSC claims 86 percent of consumers know its label and currently trust it, this misleading advertising should not be ignored, stated the report.

"We no longer believe in the MSC. We had faith in the past, but it has drifted too far and is non-recoverable. The MSC has become an obstacle to sustainable fishing. Serving as a marketing shield for the world's industrial fishers, the MSC now prevents any possibility of structural change in the fishing sector by legitimizing the worst practices," concluded Le Manach.

Based on the report, BLOOM called on retailers to "stop being accomplices" of the MSC and to provide more transparency on the provenance of their seafood supply chains.

An *Atuna* expert source said that it is "good that [the researchers] have a critical look towards MSC, but I find this black and white assumption that small-scale is good and industrial is bad very problematic, as this is not the case."

The source added that it will be interesting to see whether this has any effect on the French market. She also mentioned that the point of the study was unclear.

MSC RESPONSE

According to the sustainable fishing organization, the report's conclusion is unfounded.

"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," said the MSC in a press release referencing the report.

It adds that anyone in the fishing sector will understand that the sustainability of a fishery is not determined by size or gear. "All fishing gear can have negative impacts on marine biodiversity if poorly managed."

What is essential is to make sure that is that every boat and every gear is managed in a sustainable way, added MSC. The Council also accused BLOOM of being "over-simplistic" with its suggestion that industrial fishing was "always destructive," reported *The Grocer*. The press release also highlighted that other "reviews take a far more comprehensive review of the MSC's practices than the report presented by BLOOM."

"Seafood which carries the blue MSC label comes from fisheries which have been independently scrutinized by experts as meeting internationally recognized standards of best practice in sustainable fishing, no matter where it came from," concluded MSC.