

Sustainable Bluefin Tuna? Not So Fast.

Analysis: A decade's worth of research says that an ecolabel for industrial bluefin tuna fisheries is a sham.

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Buying fish with a clear conscience isn't easy these days. The ocean is so depleted and the demand so high that only [half](#) of the world's seafood comes from the wild. The rest is farmed. Well-intentioned consumers want to know how to minimize harm through their purchasing power when at retailers such as Marks and Spencer, Walmart, and Whole Foods. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) offers one of several guides. I'm afraid it's a sham.

For nearly 25 years, the MSC has positioned itself as the fishing industry's gold standard for ecolabeling. To be MSC certified is to be identified as the best choice in seafood, both wild and farmed, so the branding goes. Authorized contractors paid by fleets seeking certification are supposed to remain independent and take a science-based approach to verify for consumers that the fish they buy meets MSC standards: whether a fish is abundant, legal, subject to robust regulations, and caught with methods that minimize by-catch. Other aspects, such as whether a fish is high in mercury or sourced from fleets respecting human rights, are outside MSC's criteria.

But certified does not mean sustainable. The MSC has had major run-ins with conservation groups for certifying fisheries they regard as unsustainable, poorly managed, and tolerant of by-catch, habitat destruction (from fishing gear), and worker abuse. Fisheries for Ross Sea toothfish (Chilean seabass) and Antarctic krill (for fishmeal) are examples of particularly egregious cases.

Be that as it may, even more scandalous would be certifying Atlantic bluefin tuna fisheries as sustainable—a move the MSC is now considering. For decades these fisheries have drawn widespread global criticism for corruption, mismanagement, lack of transparency, bad science, and use of destructive gear. I have spent the last decade studying the demise of the once giant Atlantic bluefin as a nonaligned, accredited observer of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tunas (ICCAT), the intergovernmental regulatory agency that for a half century has overseen the capture of commercial fish on the high seas. Recently, member states seized upon the slight glimmer of hope that the population is rebounding and tripled the quota for bluefin tuna in the eastern Atlantic. They boosted catch targets for eastern bluefin from their lowest in 2010 to their highest ever in 2020, even though ICCAT's scientific committee, who recommended the hike, predicts biomass will continue to deteriorate.

Despite high mercury contamination, the bluefin make the best sushi money can buy. These sublime beings [fetch such an exorbitant price](#) that they have shrunk significantly in size and number since the advent of the global sushi economy in the 1970s. In a word, [endangered](#). The bluefin's sky-high valuation creates the conditions for black markets to proliferate. A [2018 Europol report](#) revealed that the volume of the illegal trade in eastern Atlantic bluefin tuna was double the legal one, despite multilateral investment since 2011 in electronic traceability programs to stop pirate fishing. To make matters worse, a warming ocean, increasingly plastic and acidic, portends a precarious future for giant tuna.

And yet, in early June, the MSC might certify as sustainable what appears to be, at first glance, a negligible sliver of the bluefin tuna fishery in the eastern Atlantic: two applications by [French](#) and [Japanese](#) longliners, which use gear long-known for generating some of the world's worst by-catch, from sharks to turtles to marine mammals. Green-lighting even one or two boats capturing Atlantic bluefin will set a dangerous precedent and invite the entire suite of bluefin tuna fisheries to appear sustainable to consumers.

For the MSC to even consider certifying a fish that's endangered, overexploited, mismanaged, pirated, polluted, and smaller than ever before as a best choice in seafood is baffling. But on closer look, it's not surprising. [Leading scientists](#) have shown that the MSC has conflicts of interest baked into its not-for-profit business model. [Three-quarters of MSC's income](#) comes from the logo licensing fees associated with the fisheries it certifies. Of these fisheries, 93 percent are large-scale industrial vessels (over 12 meters). Small operators in poor countries they are not, even though the MSC likes to market itself this way, [a recent study has found](#). Financial obstacles to certification are significant; each certification costs as much as US \$120,000 and must be renewed every five years. Under these conditions, a [2016 study](#) has demonstrated that, as the MSC retains and increases market access for producers, the added value alleged from standardization creates monopoly-like conditions as wealth from fisheries concentrates in the hands of a few.

Most recently, MSC's cofounder—the conservation group World Wildlife Fund (WWF)—formally [objected](#) to the bluefin certification proposal. Like Frankenstein's monster, WWF's original vision of the MSC has gone awry, and in its place is a fisheries certification that WWF has [blasted](#) for its “lack of impartiality,” raising “a red flag” about predetermined outcomes. WWF warned that MSC certification of Atlantic bluefin tuna would provide dangerous incentives to the market and mislead buyers.

The problem is twofold. At the level of consumption, most shoppers today are out of touch with the food they eat. Some, for instance, think a single adult tuna fits inside a tin can, like an anchovy. [As *Hakai Magazine* previously reported](#), the proliferation of ecolabels overwhelms consumers operating with limited information in an increasingly chaotic fish marketplace. A bluefin certification would add to the confusion and risk blessing the purchase of all bluefin tuna, no matter their origin, doubling down on the presumption that [one of the ocean's most majestic creatures](#) is just another commodity for sale, sating the appetites of sushi lovers.

At the level of extraction, MSC's own rationale—to reward a few good fishers in a very bad fishery—exposes the flaws in its project to ecolabel industrial fisheries. Informing consumers about which fish to buy may appear to be MSC's primary purpose, but on careful study that goal falls by the wayside when considering MSC's role in the broader commodity chain: to ease barriers to entry for producers looking to expand their global market share. For the MSC to retain its reputation as the preferred hub coordinating the supply and distribution of standardized fish, it must confer a pecuniary advantage to its main clients: self-interested, well-financed, subsidized, industrial fleets playing a game of ecological roulette with such velocity on a massive scale that the ocean is emptying of wild fish. Certification provides industry the necessary cover to push product in new markets, so that a delicacy now dead and chilled in lockers could be released for business and advertised as sustainably caught. To suggest the bluefin meets MSC standards courts the critique that certification programs are nothing more than a masterstroke in greenwashing, engineered by profiteers skilled in muddying the waters through third-party marketing ploys designed to relieve consumers in the Global North of guilt.

This situation will come to a head on June 1 and 2 when the MSC decides whether to uphold or overturn the objection lodged by WWF. MSC's poor track record of upholding an objection suggests the odds of success for the Atlantic bluefin are low. If the MSC certifies even one boat to extract as sustainable the last of the planet's giant fish, its ecolabel must be known as worthless and its elaborate posturing of "protecting" the ocean a fraud.

(The author notes that the MSC did not respond to her request for comment by the time of publication.)