



THE SHAM OF THE MSC LABEL

THE BIGGEST FISHING LABEL'S
REALITY UNCOVERED



In 1997, a wave of optimism shook the international marine conservation community. This rare event, given that marine ecosystems are only getting more degraded, was caused by the creation of the MSC labelling system. As its name suggests, the 'Marine Stewardship Council' label was supposed to 'guide' the general public, and in turn the entire fishing industry, towards sustainability. Citizens could finally buy fish "guilt-free".¹ Twenty years later, disillusionment is bitter for the scientists and NGOs who supported the launch and the approach of this ecolabel — initially created by the WWF and food giant Unilever, and which has since then become the world leader in seafood ecolabels.

Critics, shy at first, became more numerous and severe, questioning both the lack of ambition of the label and the application of its standards, as well as the impartiality of the certification process.²⁻⁸ MSC officials responded to criticisms by repeating that the label warranted that "no destructive fishing practices" were used.⁹ An assertion repeated countless times, but never verified.

This has now been done.

BLOOM and its co-authors from the universities of New York (United States) and Dalhousie (Canada) conducted an exhaustive analysis of all MSC-certified fisheries since the origin of the label. 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. Furthermore, BLOOM and its co-authors scrutinized the MSC's communication and uncovered that the label hid this fundamental defect by largely highlighting small-scale, low impact coastal fisheries.

BLOOM and co-authors have calculated that **industrial, high-impact fisheries represented 83% of MSC-certified catches between 2009 and 2017 but only 32% of the MSC's photographic illustrations, while, in contrast, small-scale, low-impact fisheries represented only 7% of the certified volumes but 47% of the illustrations.** The MSC label thus created its alternative reality, "guilt-free", to fit to that desired by citizens who are increasingly concerned about their purchases' environmental impact.

¹ See e.g. <http://back-from-the-brink.msc.org/>.

² Froese and Proelss (2012), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2012.03.017>.

³ Opitz et al. (2016), available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2016.05.003>.

⁴ Kourantidou and Kaiser (2019), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1093/icesjms/fsy198>.

⁵ Galil et al. (2013), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10530-013-0460-9>.

⁶ Jacquet et al. (2010), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1038/467028a>.

⁷ Christian et al. (2013), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.bio-con.2013.01.002>.

⁸ Ward (2008), available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-2979.2008.00277.x>.

⁹ Speech by MSC's CEO Rupert Howes at the April 2018 Seafood Expo in Brussels, available at: www.youtube.com/watch?v=bM-MAOzyjd_M

¹⁰ All underlying data and processing scripts are available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17632/gpyn-bmn7f9.1>



THE SCIENTIFIC PAPER IS AVAILABLE ONLINE

"Small is beautiful, but large is certified: a comparison between fisheries the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) features in its promotional materials and MSC-certified fisheries", by Frédéric Le Manach, Jennifer L. Jacquet, Megan Bailey, Charlene Jouanneau & Claire Nouvian.

Available at : <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0231073>¹⁰

THE MSC LABEL IS AN ANATHEMA TO 'SUSTAINABLE' FISHERIES



MAIN CRITICISMS ABOUT THE MSC

- 1 **Criteria to obtain the label are too lax:** any fishing method, even the most destructive, can be certified. Only explosive and poison fisheries cannot apply for MSC certification.
- 2 **The firm responsible for evaluating the fishery is chosen and remunerated by ... the fishery!** The MSC model is based on the grey area of corruption: clientelism, confusion of interests, bias.
- 3 **Citizens and NGOs have no recourse should they disagree on a certification:** the existing objection process is very costly and completely ineffective. So far, objections have mostly failed. In the art of cultivating conflicts of interest, the MSC process stipulates that the 'judge' supposed to arbitrate objections is chosen and remunerated by the MSC...

The study conducted by BLOOM and its co-authors shows that the MSC-certified fisheries are very far from the label's founding promise to guarantee that "no destructive fishing practices" are used.⁹ In reality, **the most impactful fishing methods that exist in the world, such as bottom trawls and dredges** (see page 6), **have accounted for 83% of the MSC-certified catches between 2009 and 2017.** Even the largest European factory vessels, up to 144 meters long, are MSC-certified. And it is no wonder: **the MSC label considers that only explosive and poison fishing are not 'sustainable'.** Everything else can be certified. The MSC's specifications thus allow the most impactful practices to be branded as 'sustainable'. These specifications have not only been criticized for their laxity and inconsistencies, but also for their biased and conflicting application. The defects, both upstream and downstream of the certification process, have been the subject of numerous formal criticisms, including from BLOOM.²⁻⁸



The most impactful fishing methods in the world, such as bottom trawls and dredges, represent 83% of the MSC-certified catch.

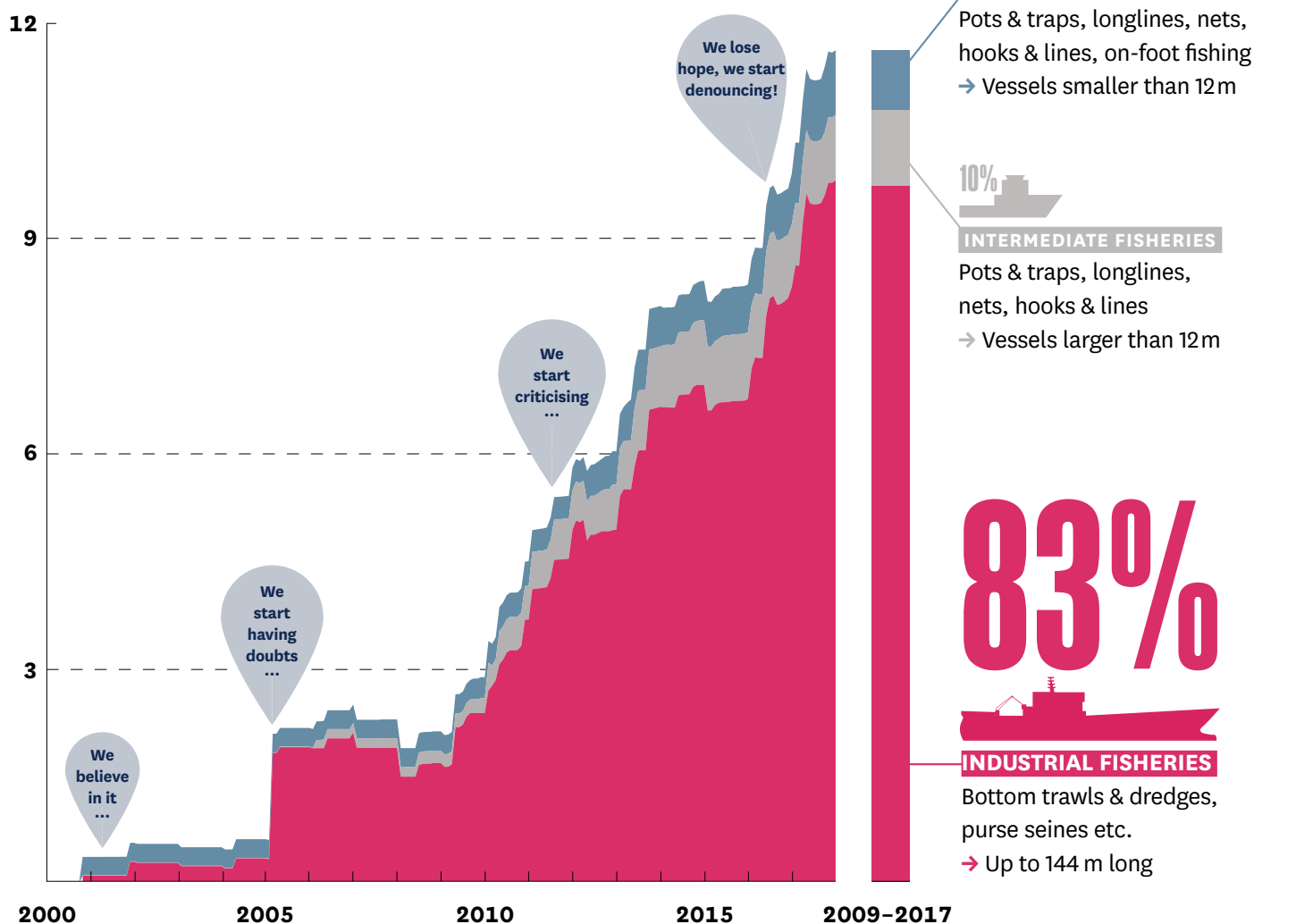


REAL 'SUSTAINABLE' FISHERIES: ALMOST NON-EXISTENT AMONGST THE CERTIFIED ONES

The data analysis conducted by BLOOM and its co-authors reveals that only 7% of the MSC-certified catches came from unequivocally sustainable fishing between 2009 and 2017, i.e. small inshore fishing, made up of vessels of less than 12 meters long using fishing gears with very limited impact on the environment. These 'passive' fishing methods include, for example, hooks & lines, pots & traps, nets, and on-foot fishing.

EVOLUTION OF MSC-CERTIFIED CATCHES

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

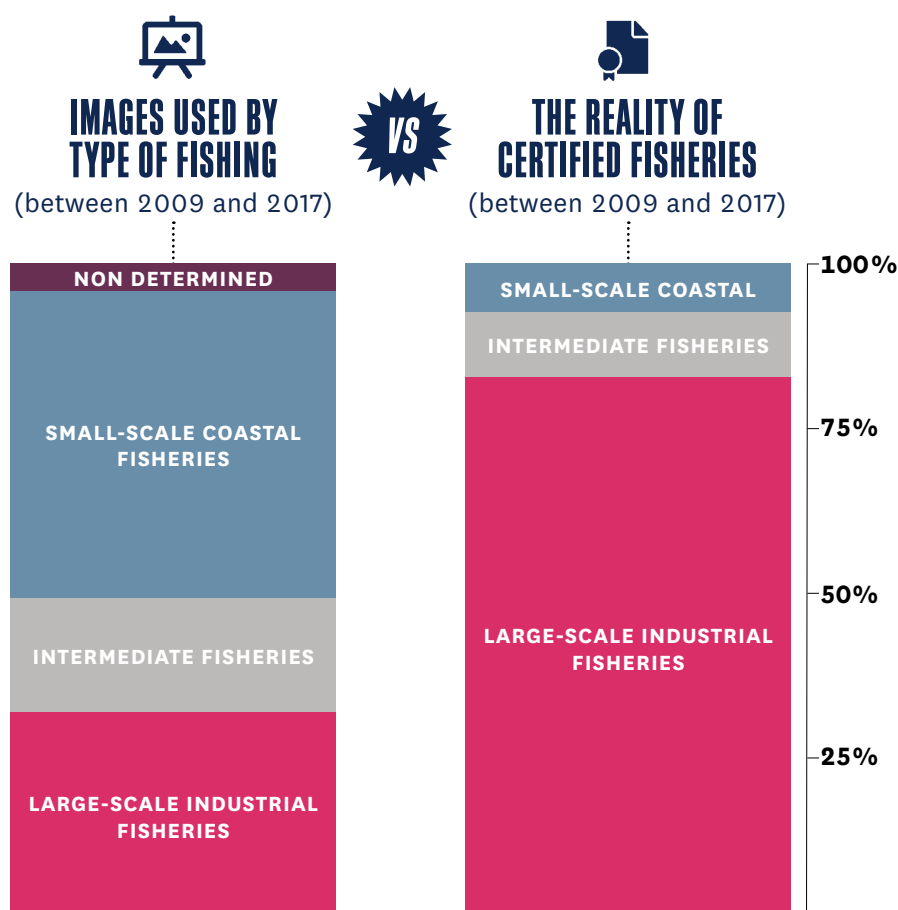




**144M-LONG 'MARGIRIS',
ONE OF THE MOST
CRITICISED FISHING
VESSELS IN THE WORLD,
IS MSC-CERTIFIED.**

THE DECEIT OF THE MSC LABEL

There is a gulf between the reality of the MSC and the perception that the brand has managed to establish in public opinion through a finely-crafted communication strategy. On the one hand, the brand has diverted and emptied the 'sustainable fishing' expression of its meaning, by giving a blank check to the most destructive methods. On the other hand, the marketing of the MSC is intentionally misleading. While **small-scale, low-impact fishing is marginal in MSC-certified fisheries — 7% of certifications over the period 2009–2017 — it accounts for 47% of the images** presented by the MSC in its activity reports and on Facebook over the same period. Small-scale fishing with low environmental impact is therefore 6.4 times more represented than it actually accounts for in certified volumes. Conversely, large-scale, high-impact fishing is 2.6 times less represented in the images than it is in certified catches (32% of photographic illustrations versus 83% of certified catches over the period 2009–2017). Such a gap is not serendipitous. It is part of a **carefully thought-out communication strategy, aiming to make the MSC pose as what it is not: a sustainable fishing label.**



METHODOLOGY

- Almost 500 fisheries assessment reports were analysed to determine the distribution of certified catches by gear and scale. This corresponds to all the data available from the first certified fisheries in 2000 until the last data collected, at the end of 2017.
- All images (almost 400) showcasing a fishing activity were extracted from all the MSC reports available online as well as from the international Facebook page of the MSC. This analysis only begins in 2009 because no official document was available online prior to this date. These images were analysed and compared to the certified catch data.

A FEW EXAMPLES OF DESTRUCTIVE AND DISPARAGED YET MSC-CERTIFIED FISHERIES



KEY DATES

1997 Creation of the MSC label by WWF and Unilever to develop a 'market-based solution' to tackle overfishing. The MSC is created with the status of a non-profit organisation.

2000 The first fisheries are certified.

2017 210 fisheries are certified (as of 31 December).

2019 The MSC has become leader by certifying 15% of the world's annual catches. Nearly 40,000 references, or one million tonnes of seafood, bear the MSC logo. Trade giants like Walmart, Carrefour, McDonalds, Ikea or Amazon 'Fresh Sold' sell — sometimes exclusively — MSC-certified seafood products.¹¹

2019 Royalties levied on MSC-certified products generate 25 million euros per year to the brand, or 80% of the MSC's income.¹¹

2020 An investigation reveals that the MSC has nearly 40 million euros in net assets (buildings, bank deposits, financial investments etc.),¹² thus making the MSC a classic capitalist object far removed from a non-profit charity.

→ Deep-sea fisheries

Deep species, which are exceptionally long-lived (for instance, orange roughy can live up to 150 years!), are fished with heavy bottom trawls that destroy centenary ecosystems, including often millennial corals.

→ Shellfish fisheries

Certain MSC-certified bivalve fisheries, such as that of surfclam and ocean quahog, are carried out with 'hydraulic dredges', whose blades penetrate into the sediment and inject pressurized water to liquefy the sediment and extract the shellfish easier.

→ Reduction fisheries

- Small fish such as sandeel, sprat and Norway pout are caught to be reduced into fishmeal and fish oil for aquaculture purposes. There is, for example, the case of a Danish fishery, whose annual catches are as large as the entire French catch!
- Krill, a small shrimp-like crustacean that is essential to the diet of many marine animals, is caught in fragile and still largely pristine waters of Antarctica to make food supplements.

→ Invasive species fisheries

Some fisheries, such as the one targeting the Kamchatka king crab, are certified as 'sustainable' despite these species having dramatic impacts on native ecosystems.

→ Tropical tuna fisheries

- Targeting tunas using 'fish aggregating devices' (or 'FADs') in the Indian, Atlantic and Western Pacific oceans results in the capture and death of many juvenile tuna and non-target species, such as sharks and turtles.
- Tuna in the eastern part of the Pacific Ocean are caught in association with dolphins, killed by the hundreds annually.

...And very soon, **Atlantic bluefin tuna**, an endangered species that is just beginning to recover from decades of overfishing, will also be certified!

¹¹ See 2018–2019 MSC's activity report, available at: <https://bit.ly/3axR5i2>.

¹² Fiorillo (2020), available at: <https://www.intrafish.com/opinion/why-is-the-marine-stewardship-council-hoarding-its-cash-/2-1-758524>.

**DEEP-SEA BOTTOM
TRAWLING, A PRACTICE
BANNED IN EUROPE,
CAN BE MSC-CERTIFIED
ELSEWHERE...**

THE GREENWASHING OF INDUSTRIAL FISHING

By manipulating small-scale coastal fishers in its communication, the MSC greenwashes industrial fishing and facilitates, or even maintains, their access to markets at the very moment when citizen awareness is growing in distrust of industrial production methods. Never has a modesty apron been more useful to industrials than at a time when citizens, tired of lies and agri-food scandals, take note of the irresponsibility of the industrial sector and turn to other habits and consumption circuits.



Today, it appears that the MSC, far from being a solution, has become an obstacle to sustainable fishing.



Serving as a marketing shield for the world's industrial fishers, masked behind the dubious tinsel of NGOs, and determined to deceive the general public as well as public authorities, the MSC now prevents any possibility of structural change in the fishing sector by legitimizing the worst practices. Instead of supporting virtuous practices for the environment and employment, the MSC has turned into an additional weapon for crushing small-scale coastal fishing by industrial fishing and mass retail. All criticisms of the MSC in this regard have been dismissed with the back of the hand by its leaders. **At a time when citizens are more determined than ever to support virtuous local fishing, they are helpless, lacking a reliable tool to guide their responsible purchases.**

WHAT SHOULD WE DO TO EAT REAL 'SUSTAINABLE' SEAFOOD AND PRESERVE VIRTUOUS FISHING?

Fish populations are getting depleted, the ocean is emptying, time is running out. So let's be strategic: we don't have the luxury of hitting the wrong target.

WE can change our actions.

And **WE can** ask those from whom we buy our fish to **change theirs**.

In France and in the UK, three out of four fish are sold in large or medium-sized retailers. Retailers such as Tesco, Sainsbury, Carrefour, Asda, Leclerc, Morrisons, Marks & Spencers, Metro etc. must very clearly distinguish on their stalls fish caught by small-scale, coastal fishing (vessels of less than 12 meters long and using only 'passive' gears), from those caught by the big industrial vessels.

Stop amalgamating small and big!



CHANGE YOUR HABITS TO CHANGE THE WORLD

- ❶ **Reduce your intake of animal protein**, including fish. This is the n°1 action to reduce our 'carbon impact' and limit global warming.
- ❷ **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.
- ❸ **Buy fish from small-scale coastal fishing**: vessels under 12 meters and using passive gears (line, trap, net, on-foot fishing).
- ❹ **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).
- ❺ **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.



LET'S CHANGE RETAILING SO THAT IT CHANGES THE WORLD

We ask retailers to stop being accomplices of the MSC's lies by hiding behind this misleading label, instead of setting up restrictive requirements to guide their purchasing policy. Tesco, Sainsbury, Carrefour, Asda, Morrisons, Leclerc, Marks & Spencers, Metro and all other brands are committed to a relationship of trust with their customers, whom they must honour. The MSC label is discredited, large retailers can no longer pretend to ignore it. As consumers and concerned citizens, we demand transparency on the products sold, and we want to be able to buy according to environmental, ethical and social criteria. We ask retailers to :

- **Clearly distinguish seafood from small-scale coastal fishing**: a clear and systematic indication of the fishing method and vessel length.
- **Disengage from an 'all MSC' policy**. No label can be used as a magic shield, protecting mass retailers from their responsibilities.



TO GO FURTHER

To learn more about 'misleading labels', visit our website:
<http://www.bloomassociation.org/en/our-actions/our-themes/misleading-labels/>

