

MSC faces NGO criticism in Atlantic bluefin hearing, new report

By Madelyn Kearns
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Editor's note: This story has been updated with the Marine Stewardship Council's perspective on the hearings related to the Usufuku Honten Northeast Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery's assessment. A clarification has also been made regarding the timeframe of the second independent assessment of bluefin tuna fisheries commissioned by the World Wildlife Fund and conducted by SAI Global. That assessment began in December 2017 and was published in June 2018, as this article now reflects.

In a hearing taking place on 1 and 2 June, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) is questioning the merits of the certification assessment

process underway on behalf of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) regarding the Honten Northeast Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery, citing a "questionable evaluation process that has repeatedly ignored the fragile status of the stock."

According to WWF, the evaluation of the bluefin tuna fishery has dismissed "the best available science and therefore produced a evaluation of the fishery that does not reflect the reality at sea."

Conducted entirely independently of the MSC, the hearing aims to resolve the outstanding disagreements on whether the fishery meets international standards for sustainable fishing set by the certification organization, MSC said in a press release.

"This assessment is the first time a bluefin tuna fishery has been considered for certification to the MSC's science-based standard. The historic overexploitation of bluefin means that it has drawn international attention," MSC said.

Following a "detailed assessment process" of the Usufuku Honten Northeast Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery, independent assessment body Control Union Pesca Ltd. recommended that the fishery be certified in December 2019, MSC noted. In January 2020, WWF and The Pew Trust launched formal objections to Control Union's recommendation, MSC said.

WWF has long expressed skepticism when it comes to the scientific rigor MSC says it applies to respect the sustainability of fish stocks during the certification process.

"In the case of the eastern Atlantic bluefin, a population that went from being largely abundant to heavily overfished and that is still largely illegally fished, rigorous science and a precautionary approach would have been in order," WWF said in a press release.

MSC Chief Science and Standards Officer Rohan Currey confirmed that, over the past two years, "independent experts, scientists and NGOs involved in this assessment have scrutinized and debated the sustainability of the Usufuku Honten fishery."

"This bluefin fishery voluntarily entered into assessment in 2018 and that process is still underway. As part of this, WWF and The Pew Trust will now have the opportunity to present unresolved objections to an independent legal expert, who will then decide a way forward," Currey added.

WWF Mediterranean Marine Initiative Director Giuseppe Di Carlo said WWF aims to prove over the two-day virtual hearing that the evaluation process for the Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery has been insufficient.

“After a long evaluation process that has been compromised by failures in impartiality and scientific rigor, it is our expectation that the hearing for the objection will ensure a transparent and impartial approach to the assessment of the Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery that is undergoing certification. This case will demonstrate if the MSC label puts ocean sustainability first or if science has been overruled by profit,” Di Carlo said.

In an effort to obtain what it calls a “scientifically-sound assessment,” WWF commissioned a second independent assessment in December 2017 of bluefin tuna fisheries through another MSC-accredited conformity assessment body, SAI Global. Published in June 2018, the evaluation noted that “serious issues have been identified and the pre-assessment predicted an overall fail for the MSC Standards Principle 1 [5]. The Eastern Atlantic and Mediterranean bluefin tuna stock is not at or fluctuating around a level consistent with MSY [6].”

The certifications of two bluefin tuna fisheries are currently being opposed by WWF, including the Usufuku Honten Northeast Atlantic longline fishery and the French artisanal longline and handline SATHOAN fishery. The organization said it “believes that independently from the size and type of the fisheries, the current conservation and management measures in place do not ensure that Atlantic bluefin tuna is sustainably caught or traded.”

“We are strongly concerned that granting the MSC certification to the first Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery will send the wrong message to consumers that trust the label with the understanding that it is a proof of sustainability. Unfortunately, that is not always the case,” Di Carlo added.

Currey said that it is still uncertain what the outcome of the assessment for the Usufuku Honten Northeast Atlantic bluefin tuna fishery will be.

“We cannot prejudge the outcome of this assessment - but fisheries only get certified if they can demonstrate, through evidence, that they meet the MSC’s robust standard. Clearly, this is vital for a stock such as the Eastern Atlantic bluefin which has suffered historic over-exploitation,” he said.

MSC faced additional NGO criticism in a recently released [report from NGO Bloom](#), published in Plos One, claims that MSC is a “sham,” predominantly certifying “industrial, destructive fisheries.”

With its co-authors from New York University and Dalhousie University in Canada, Bloom conducted “an exhaustive analysis of all MSC-certified fisheries since the origin of the label,” the report claimed.

Industrial, high-impact fisheries represented 83 percent of MSC-certified catches between 2009 and 2017, and were depicted in 32 percent of MSC’s photographic illustrations, Bloom and the report co-authors calculated. Small-scale, low-impact fisheries, which represent 7 percent of MSC certified volumes, were depicted in 47 percent of illustrations, the report argued.

MSC has called the report “deeply misleading.”

“The main accusation, that the MSC has used imagery to present a false picture of our work is wholly untrue. The research is based on 399 photographs, across eight years, including from just one of MSC’s 18 Facebook accounts. We do not believe this analysis to be a relevant or credible indicator for evaluating a science-based certification program,” the certifier said in a press statement responding to the report.

According to MSC, the percentage of small-scale fisheries achieving MSC certification is currently around 16 percent, which 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,” MSC said.

The certification organization also refuted Bloom’s classification of all industrial fisheries being destructive.

“This gives an over-simplistic image,” MSC said. “The sustainability of a fishery is not determined by its size or fishing gear alone. 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 fish stocks and all the surrounding marine species and habitats. These are two of the three pillars of our standard that fisheries must meet to be MSC-certified.”



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