

Fisheries eco-labelling in India – Marine Stewardship Council clarifications

This is regarding the article ‘Who should certify the sustainability of fisheries? A property rights perspective on eco-labelling’¹.

Fish do not respect national boundaries and so ensuring that our oceans are sustainable requires a global response.

India has adopted the UN Food and Agriculture Code of Conduct for sustainable fisheries, alongside all major fishing nations of the world. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Standard is a voluntary programme based on this Code, that enables consumers to make a conscious choice when purchasing seafood. The Government of India (GoI) has recognized the value of MSC certification in providing global assurance of sustainability by, for example, paying associated surveillance or assessment fees for the Indian Ashtamudi clam fishery.

Fisheries and seafood businesses of all sizes, and from many different locations, voluntarily seek certification against the MSC standards, which meet international best practice for sustainability. These include small-scale fisheries and fisheries in the Global South, and there are several reasons why they choose to become MSC-certified. MSC certification provides access to new markets, a pathway for improvements via tools, guidance and funds and protected livelihoods through sustainable fish stocks.

Half the world’s traded seafood comes from the Global South and ensuring fishing in these countries is sustainable is critically important. An international standard creates a level playing field for all countries and acknowledges the significant global trade in seafood. The MSC has developed extensive programmes and tools to make certification accessible to small-scale fisheries and fisheries in the Global South.

Unfortunately, the above-mentioned article makes some fundamental errors, which the authors need to address.

The MSC sets the standard for certified sustainable seafood, but does not assess fisheries itself or receive payment for fisheries to become certified. Assessments are carried out by indepen-

dent, third party Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs), who appoint teams made up of fisheries management experts. The MSC receives no remuneration for this. Fees are set by and paid to the CAB. The MSC receives income from royalties on consumer facing products that come from certified fisheries and are sold with the blue MSC label. The use of this label is entirely optional.

Fisheries usually pay their own certification fees, though in some cases they are supported by retailers and other stakeholders to cover the costs of improvements towards sustainability. Motivation to do so is often in response to market demand. The MSC is not able to waive fees as it is not involved in any transaction relating to assessment and certification of fisheries. In the case of the Ashtamudi clam fishery, the original surveillance fees were paid for by the Marine Products Export Development Authority of GoI. The CAB fees for its first assessments were then paid for by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF), an independent environmental non-governmental organization (NGO). WWF also assisted the Ben Tre fishery in Vietnam with their first full assessment costs.

WWF is not affiliated to the MSC. Conservationists from this international NGO and representatives from Unilever joined forces in 1995, to address the global issue of overfishing. Following this, in 1997, the MSC was officially launched and has since operated as an independent not-for-profit organization.

There is no limit on the number of harvesters that can get certified, with existing MSC-certified fisheries, including some with hundreds of vessels. To date, there are 386 fisheries certified – that is 16% of the global marine catch.

MSC-labelled seafood can be found on a wide range of products, from a can of tuna to luxury sushi – giving consumers a choice for their budget.

Details of all fisheries in the MSC programme are publicly available on fisheries.msc.org.

1. Ramachandran, C. and Parappurathu, S., *Curr. Sci.*, 2020, **118**(10), 1496–1499.

LOUANNE MOSTERT

*Marine House, 1 Snow Hill,
London,
EC1A 2DH, UK
e-mail: info@msc.org*

Response:

We appreciate the comments of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC).

Since it has been clarified that the MSC neither conducts any certification nor levies any charges *directly*, we stand corrected on our assumption regarding waiving of the fees. However, we thank the respondent for revealing the fact that the surveillance fees in the case of the Ashtamudi clam fishery were paid by the Marine Product Export Development Agency (MPEDA), Government of India. Neither MPEDA nor the MSC makes this information available for public access through its website.

It has also been clarified that the MSC leaves the option of payment of certification fees open in some cases like for the Ashtamudi clams, thus unburdening the fishery stakeholders who otherwise, in general, have to bear it directly. These facts nevertheless strengthen our larger argument that the cost of eco-label certification in countries like India ultimately becomes the liability of the State, whereas the benefits might accrue only to an inclusive lot. We would like to interpret the existence of an ‘incentivization latitude’ as a weak defence against our core argument, rather than an error worthy of any indictment.

C. RAMACHANDRAN
SHINOJ PARAPPURATHU*

*Socioeconomic Evaluation and
Technology Transfer Division,
ICAR-Central Marine Fisheries
Research Institute,
Kochi 682 018, India
e-mail: pshinoj@gmail.com
