

REPORT

Webinar: **Blue Deal Debate: Beyond the label: Is the MSC driving progress in sustainable fishing?**

Parties: **Camiel Derichs (MSC Programme Development Director), Erin Priddle (MSC Regional Director North Europe), Rohan Currey (MSC Chief Science and Standards Officer)**

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Location: **WebinarJam**

Moderator: **Chris Davies**

Rapporteur: **Tamara Talevska**

In the latest of the Blue Deal Debates, a webinar titled Beyond the label: Is the MSC driving progress in sustainable fishing? Chris Davies hosted MSC representatives Camiel Derichs (MSC Programme Development Director), Erin Priddle (MSC Regional Director North Europe), and Rohan Currey (MSC Chief Science and Standards Officer) in an attempt to clarify some of the questions and critiques that emerged recently, particularly after the Seaspiracy documentary.

The speakers explained that the MSC is a certification scheme established by Unilever and WWF, bringing together environmental conservation organisation and the industry to work on increasing sustainability of fishery products. Today, subject to independent verification, more than 400 wild-capture fisheries and 13% of global fish catch around the world are certified to this standard. To become certified, fisheries must comply with a series of requirements across three principles: only fishing healthy stocks, being well-managed so stocks can be fished for the long-term, and minimising their impact on other species and the wider ecosystem. MSC label's strongest presence is in North America, Northern Europe, Australia and Asia. Marketwise, MSC is strong in Europe, and increasing its presence in North America and Asia.

The MSC uses market as a tool for increasing sustainability and create incentives to drive fisheries management improvement. MSC believes that a market-based product with fisheries at the heart of sustainability issue will bring about better results in its implementation. Fisheries grounded in governance and good management are able to demonstrate their credibility through MSC label, which helps them with increased recognition of their sustainable fishing practices, market access, and recovering the status of responsible operators.

During the webinar it was acknowledged that the sector has been advancing in terms of recognizing the importance sustainability. Fishers are increasingly changing their practices and committing to sustainability. Young fisheries students are exposed to sustainability courses.

The MSC is classified as a non-profit NGO. Despite the non-profitability clause, only some of its budget comes from foundation grants. The rest of their revenue comes from the licensing

fee they charge businesses for the right to sell seafood with the certified sustainable label. MSC explains that the driver for licensing is not profitability. Throughout the 5-year licensing period fishers need to demonstrate their credibility with set conditions and improvements, thus proving the claim that the MSC is interested in ending overfishing, not the product on the shelf.

The MSC label is composed of 28 criteria, developed on the grounds of FAO ecolabelling guidelines from 2011. The standards are applied by independent auditors, conformity assessment body, who conducts an assessment of the fishery. Assessments involve multiple rounds of stakeholder comments, including from fisheries, science, peers. It is a rigorous and intense procedure that takes from 9 to 12 months. The certificate is trying to calibrate the latest science and existing management measures, and is subject to annual surveillance audits.

The certification process requires considerable investment and efforts, which can make it difficult for some (particularly small-scale) fisheries to reach the standard by level of performance or sourcing. While small-scale fisheries are able to comply, indeed more larger scale fisheries decide to undergo the process. Ways to incentivise these by creating a pathway to support such fisheries is through capacity building, risk-based assessment methodologies, and similar.

The MSC standards require that the fishery complies with MSY. If fish numbers fall below sustainable limits, a certified fishery will adjust what they catch. If they do not, their MSC certification can be suspended. A suspended fishery will not be able to sell fish with the blue fish label until they have a management strategy that rebuilds the fish population. While it is impossible to predict all circumstances and environmental factors, the fishery can be suspended when recruitment, stock status or management do not improve.

While a number of retailers have their own sustainability policies and claims, the MSC label is the only certification with incorporated traceability and aligned with FAO guidelines. Today many retailers still sell non-sustainable seafood. Nevertheless, the consumers are raising their awareness, and one way of making the concept viable is through consumer pressure. It is also important to note that MSC is a partner of some of the biggest retailers in the world even though there is a plethora of options for them to pick from, from carbon emissions to human rights labelling. Participants highlighted that it is important to avoid greenwashing. Public policy initiatives are tackling this, and MSC and other environmental standards organisations are working with these policy initiatives.

The moderator questioned the rationale behind certifying fisheries providing fish for fishmeal (such as for example Peruvian anchovies). The MSC representative replied that the MSC's focus is on sustainability of seafood, state of stocks, ecosystem considerations. Small pelagic species, such as Peruvian anchovies, are important for the functioning of the ecosystem.

The moderator went on to place MSC in line with other sustainability claims, such as 'responsibly sourced', 'dolphin friendly' and explained that a few of these are at the level of MSC in terms of transparency, assurance systems, monitoring etc. They explained that 'Responsibly sourced' is a catch-word, as nobody really knows what 'responsibly' in this case means. It was suggested that NGO community should take these actors to account and verify if the standards are indeed valid.

It was noted that MSC and NGO community have the same objective, however their tools and efficacy strategies differ. It was recognised that cooperation could bring about positive change, particularly in terms of the pressing challenges of climate change, ocean acidification, changing legal landscape and so on. Another way to step these endeavours up is to liaise with financial institutions who could embed sustainability conditions in their financial products. Legislators have the responsibility to prepare legislative environment supporting the step in the direction of sustainability. Markets shall accommodate to a higher level of performance, opting for 'sustainable' not 'cheapest'. Capital markets engagement is an important factor that could help fishers assume the labelling process.

One of the environmental criticisms was about MSC's decision to verify and certify differently sourced fish horizontally. MSC clarified that analysis through the theory of change showed that separation based on practice is not viable, as fishers then start bringing in new techniques and species. Hence, a horizontal approach was considered more appropriate.

Criticism also touches upon bycatch and shark finning, to which MSC responded that fisheries where information is unveiled on either incidents would be suspended. On shark finning they added that while they empower clients to remove such vessels from the scheme, there is not yet a legal system in place that would prohibit the practice. The solution could be consumer driven, by consumers rejecting shark fin delicacies. MSC certified fisheries shall comply with fins naturally attached policy, meaning that whole sharks are landed with their fins intact. On unsustainable trawling techniques, MSC explained that only a couple of techniques and gears, such a fishing with toxins and explosives, are banned in FAO guidelines, which are followed by the MSC.

The moderator conveyed that the latest review of fisheries standards was deemed non-transparent and slow. MSC rejected this by highlighting that MSC consultation processes are good, transparent and open. Stakeholder issues have been addressed and the proposals incorporated in consultation with them. The consequences are evaluated by the technical advisory board. They claimed that an independent review of this scale would have been duplicative and would undermine the fisheries standard review. Stakeholders were invited to join MSC's own evaluation process.

In conclusion it was established that an international, multilateral, global collaborative effort to fisheries governance is needed in order to engage fishers in highly sustainable, high-information, science-based and adaptive management. It was stressed that enabling environment for sustainable seafood is not to be taken for granted and that trials and tribulations are needed for organisations to be held to account. Global governance is crucial and MSC is in a strong position to be part of this. Nevertheless, the enabling environment needs to continue growing. Participants concluded that sustainable fisheries are possible only and insofar as the different parties are working together.