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Letter to the Editor

Not "the best environmental choice in seafood": A response to Gutiérrez and Agnew (2013)

In our article (Christian et al. 2013), we review the 19 formal objections to certifications of fisheries by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) and, in the process, conclude that loose interpretation of MSC's criteria has led to fisheries being certified that are not, as the MSC claims, "the best environmental choice in seafood." For instance, the MSC has certified both the Canadian swordfish longline fishery, which would seem to be in violation of MSC's Principle 2 (low impacts on the ecosystem) because it catches 5 sharks for each swordfish, alongside the Canadian swordfish harpoon fishery, which has zero bycatch. It is hard to see how both can be considered the "best environmental choice."

Furthermore, the MSC fails to view its stamp of sustainability in larger view of how that fish is ultimately being put to use (i.e., to unsustainably feed carnivorous farmed fish, poultry and pigs). The MSC's frequent public defense that its methods comply with the UN FAO's Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries, but this is not true because the Code, unlike the MSC (which has certified several fishmeal fisheries, including Antarctic krill), establishes that "states should encourage the use of fish for human consumption."

Gutiérrez and Agnew (2013) did not choose to respond to the flaws we identified in the certification process; namely, that the third-party certification bodies award certifications to fisheries that do not actually fit the MSC criteria (or the MSC notion of "the best environmental choice") and that the objections process to date has not led to stricter interpretations of the MSC principles. They pointed instead to benefits of "the participatory and transparent objections procedures" in terms of lowered scores and recommendations for improvements in fisheries. However, in only one of the 19 formal objections were any changes sufficient to make a substantial difference in the outcome of the certification process.

Changes to scoring or recommendations that do not change the final certification decision have limited impact, and grade inflation is common as evident most recently in the ongoing objection to the certification of the pollock fishery in the Russian Sea of Okhotsk, where the certification body Intertek Moody Marine lowered a score in response to peer-reviewed comments, but raised an unrelated score to assure that the aggregate score remained at 80 (a passing level). A similar scenario occurred in responding to objections raised in regard to scoring in the Ross Sea Antarctic toothfish certification, where a few scores were lowered, but this did not prevent the fishery from being certified. Additionally, Gutiérrez and Agnew's (2013) assertion that objections have "resulted in-...time-bound requirements for fishery improvements" leaves out the fact that many MSC conditions might result in improvements in process and but not outcomes, i.e., requiring additional research on ecosystem impacts but not requiring the fishery to make any changes based on the findings.

Gutiérrez and Agnew (2013), both employees of the MSC, also responded to the review by saying that: "the authors do not declare their personal interests in the article: more than one-third of the objections listed in their Table 1 were filed by co-authors or the institutions that employ them." The claim that a peer-reviewed paper authored by 11 authors at different institutions (all disclosed) questioning the MSC process should be less credible than a defense of the MSC written by two MSC employees is interesting legerdemain. Furthermore, in offering a defense to Marko et al. (2011), which DNA-analyzed 36 MSC-certified toothfish samples and showed that some did not originate from the certified South Georgia sub-population, and that three of the samples were not even Patagonian toothfish, Gutiérrez and Agnew (2013) affirmed MSC traceability by citing a study conducted by the MSC itself. Even more interesting, Agnew was quoted in a 2012 news article in *Nature* (Cressey, 2012) saying, "There are no overfished stocks carrying the MSC logo. They are all fished sustainably." This statement directly contradicts the MSC's own assessment, which analyzed 45 MSC-certified fish stocks and found 16% were subject to ongoing overfishing (Agnew et al., 2013).

The MSC might continue to make the argument that its certification improves fisheries. In fact, we agree that market tools can play an important role in better management, especially if the standards are scientific and strictly interpreted. But as the outcome of this and other reviews have demonstrated, the MSC cannot credibly assert that its fisheries are always "the best environmental choice in seafood." That is simply untrue.

References

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