

## **A path towards sustainable fishery: an outline of Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certification**

The following article is a part of FIFP webinars conducted on 5th December 2020 on the topic Certifications and regulations in seafood industry.

Note from the Chief Editor:

Certifications and regulations in seafood industry comprised the main theme of FIFP webinar conducted on 5<sup>th</sup> December 2020. In all, three presentations were made that covered Development and regulatory aspects of CIFT-Turtle Excluder Devices; A path towards sustainable fishery: an outline of Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) Certification; and Food safety, Quality, Health, Safety, Environment (QHSE) and ethical certification schemes for seafood processing industry. Dr. Ranjit Suseelan highlighted the role of Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) in recognizing and developing sustainable marine capture fisheries worldwide through ecolabelling and certification. The certification contributes towards achieving Sustainable Development Goal (SDG)14 and other related SDGs. He explained the basic principles, eligibility criteria and benefits of MSC Certification. He elaborated the components of MSC certification process, functions of the conformity assessment bodies (CABs) and brought out the importance of Chain of Custody certification. Details of Performance indicators, MSC fishery scoring guideposts and support of MSC in Fisheries Improvement Programs were provided.

### **Introduction**

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is an international not-for-profit organization established to transform the way the oceans are fished by creating market recognition and incentives for well managed and sustainable fisheries worldwide. The MSC has developed a logo to inform consumers that when they buy seafood products with a MSC logo they are supporting healthier oceans and a healthier environment. MSC supports development of sustainable marine fisheries by promoting responsible environmentally sound, socially beneficial, and economically viable fisheries practices while maintaining the biodiversity, productivity, and ecological process of the marine environment. Both the end customer and the fishing industry gain through this certification. MSC environmental standards for sustainable fishing are based on FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF). MSC Certification is a set of Principles and Criteria for sustainable fishing which is used as a standard in a third party, independent and voluntary certification programme. These were developed by means of extensive international consultative process through which the views of stakeholders in fisheries were gathered.

MSC certification contributes to SDG14 on Life Below Water, which commits countries to conserve and use the oceans sustainably, seas and marine resources for sustainable development. MSC's work also contributes to other goals including

food security (SDG2), decent work (SDG8), sustainable consumption and production (SDG12) and strengthening global partnerships for sustainable development (SDG17).

### **Basic principles of MSC Certification**

Principle (P1): A fishery must be conducted in a manner that does not lead to overfishing or depletion of the exploited populations and for those populations that are depleted, fishery must be conducted in a manner that demonstrably leads to their recovery.

Principle (P2): Fishing operations should allow for the maintenance of the structure, productivity, function, and diversity of the ecosystem (including habitat and associated dependent and ecologically related species on which the fishery depends).

Principle (P3): The fishery is subject to an effective management system that respects local, national, and international laws and standards and incorporates institutional and operational frameworks that require use of the resource to be responsible and sustainable.

To determine if each principle is met (for guidance on how certification can be approached see <https://www.msc.org/documents/getcertified/fisheries>), the MSC Fisheries Standard comprises 28 performance indicators (Fig. 1). These are used by independent conformity assessment bodies (CABs) to score the fishery (Fig. 2). To ensure the MSC program and its associated benefits are accessible to all fisheries including those from the developing world, the MSC developed a set of precautionary risk-based indicators for the assessment of data-deficient fisheries - the Risk-Based Framework (RBF).

An infographic on the characteristics of a credible FIP is given in Fig. 3. The first step is to identify fisheries which have the potential for MSC certification.

### **Why MSC?**

Several ecolabelling programs exist for wild capture fisheries. The MSC, however, is a globally recognized and truly independent third-party certification program that holds the most credible sustainability standard for wild-caught fish for the following reasons:

- The MSC is fully compliant with the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. It is also consistent with the ISEAL (the global membership organisation for ambitious, collaborative, and transparent sustainability systems) Alliance codes of good practice on standard setting and impact monitoring.
- Accredited, third-party Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) complete fishery assessments against the MSC standard.
- The MSC assessment methodology is fully defined and publicly available, as is the guidance for use of the methodology. Performance indicators are measurable with detailed scoring guideposts for each.

- The MSC standard not only ensures that responsible management practices are in place, but also that fisheries are operating at sustainable levels (e.g., stocks are above the point of impaired recruitment; the fishery does not cause serious or irreversible harm to habitat structure or function).
- The program includes annual monitoring and review processes to ensure that certified fisheries continue to meet the MSC standard.
- A robust traceability system, the MSC Chain of Custody (CoC) certification program, ensures that MSC certified products can be traced back to a certified fishery at each point in the supply chain.
- The MSC certification process is fully transparent, and stakeholders play an active role in each assessment to reduce the risk of undue influence by any one party during the certification process. Each assessment team is required to consult with stakeholders at several points during the assessment process to ensure a scientifically robust outcome.

### **Benefits of MSC Certification**

For fisheries, benefits of MSC certification could include

- retention of current markets (particularly for those selling to companies that are committed to sourcing MSC certified products)
- access to new markets
- preferred supplier status
- price premiums
- product differentiation
- international recognition of sustainable practices
- improved fishing practices
- improved fishery management
- increased knowledge about the fishery
- improved community organization and involvement
- motivation for improved practices by peer group fisheries
- a credible sustainability claim
- confidence in the sustainability of the fishery
- security in fishing-related livelihoods for the future
- local pride

For seafood buyers, sourcing from an MSC certified fishery

- provides confidence in the sustainability of the product
- allows for a credible and traceable sustainability claim
- demonstrates a public commitment to sustainability
- helps to meet growing consumer demand for sustainable products

### **Who Is Eligible for MSC Status?**

The MSC standard is applicable to all wild-capture fisheries around the world (except for those that use poison or dynamite, or target sharks for their fins), including small-scale fisheries and fisheries in developing countries. In fact, several small scale and developing country fisheries around the world have already

received MSC certification. Many small-scale fisheries lack sufficient data to be evaluated against certain performance indicators in the MSC's standard assessment tree. In response to this challenge, the MSC developed its Risk-Based Framework, which uses stakeholder feedback to assess risk in lieu of a quantitative analysis. This approach provides fisheries an additional way to be assessed when quantitative information is not available.

### **The conformity assessment bodies (CABs)**

The CAB conducts the pre-assessment or full assessment of the fishery against the MSC standard. CABs are a third party, independent of both the MSC and the fishery client. A pre-assessment team typically comprises one or two expert team members, while a full assessment team consists of two to four experts. CABs may contract independent consultants (e.g., scientists or former fishery managers) to serve on an assessment team.

### **Fishery Stakeholders**

Stakeholder involvement is a key part of the MSC process, particularly during full assessment. During full assessment, stakeholders are invited to provide feedback about nominations for assessment team members, the performance indicators to be used in the assessment, the performance of the fishery in relation to the MSC standard, peer reviewers, the public comment draft report, the final report, and the determination of whether a fishery should be certified. Participants in an assessment will vary depending on the nature of the fishery and the extent of local interest, but fishery stakeholders often include

- producers
- other members of the fishery's supply chain
- fishery managers
- government officials
- academics
- environmental NGOs

Ideally, a diverse group of stakeholders should be part of the process so that all fishery sectors are represented and can provide as much information about the fishery as possible during the assessment process, ensuring an accurate and robust analysis by the assessment team.

### **The MSC**

The MSC serves as the standard holder. It ensures that the program keeps up with best practice guidelines and the best available science, and that CABs are applying the standard appropriately. The MSC does not certify fisheries itself. Accreditation Services International (ASI) accredits independent CABs to conduct assessments against the MSC standard. This third-party approach ensures that the program is robust and credible and meets best practice guidelines.

### **The MSC Certification Process**

There are two distinct components of the MSC certification process:

- Pre-Assessment—a preliminary (and, if desired, confidential) review to determine whether a fishery is ready for full assessment.
- Full Assessment—a more intensive process that determines whether the fishery meets the MSC standard and can be certified.

### **MSC Pre-assessment**

Pre-assessment provides a brief analysis of the fishery against the MSC standard, and usually takes approximately six months to complete. An MSC pre-assessment provides guidance as to whether or not a specific fishery is likely to meet the MSC standard for sustainable fishing. The goals of a pre-assessment are to

- obtain a clear understanding of the nature, scale, and intensity of the fishery
- evaluate the potential of the fishery to achieve MSC certification
- identify any issues that may compromise a full assessment

An accredited third-party CAB is contracted by the client to conduct the pre-assessment. The assessment team does not precisely score the fishery against the MSC criteria during pre-assessment but will provide a brief red/yellow/ green “traffic light” analysis of how the fishery aligns with each performance indicator and what issues would likely prevent the fishery from meeting the MSC standard.

Based on the analysis, recommendations and next steps include:

- If the pre-assessment finds the fishery likely to meet the MSC standard, the CAB will recommend that it proceed to full assessment.
- If the CAB identifies actions that should be undertaken by the client prior to proceeding with full assessment, the client may desire to work with stakeholders to develop a comprehensive Fishery Improvement Program (FIP).

### **MSC Full assessment**

MSC full assessment will determine whether the fishery can be certified and is eligible to use the MSC ecolabel. Full assessment usually takes 12 to 18 months to complete. Fisheries that are likely to meet the MSC standard (based on the results of a pre-assessment or FIP review meeting) are ready to enter the MSC full assessment process. During MSC full assessment, the CAB evaluates whether the fishery complies with the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing. The full assessment process involves

- formation of an expert assessment team
- an information-gathering phase and site visit
- development of a detailed assessment report that scores the fishery against the MSC performance indicators
- client review of the assessment report
- peer review of the assessment report
- stakeholder review of the assessment report
- final determination of whether the fishery meets the MSC standard
- a period during which stakeholders can lodge objections to certification.

The full assessment process is public and involves stakeholder participation in many steps along the way. The MSC certificate is valid for five years, after which a fishery must be re-assessed to remain MSC certified.

### **Chain of Custody**

Certification of a fishery alone does not allow the sale of product with the MSC ecolabel. This requires separate CoC certification. The fishery assessment will identify the point at which fishery certification ends and chain of custody certification begins. The CoC is the responsibility of those buying and selling the certified product. You might want to reach out to relevant points in the supply chain during the full assessment to inform them of this requirement. A site visit is required to assess supply chain companies against the CoC standard, so there can be substantial cost-savings from having the CAB conduct CoC certification of any local companies at the same time as the full assessment of the fishery.

### **Conclusion**

Ecolabelling is a market-based tool to promote the sustainable use of natural resources. Behind the ecolabel is a certification process. Chain of Custody certification is mandatory for sale of products with MSC ecolabel. Among the existing ecolabelling programs, the MSC is a globally recognized and independent third-party certification program that holds the most credible sustainability standard for wild-caught fish. Pre-assessment and full assessment comprise the MSC certification process. For MSC assessment, an accredited independent third-party certification body (Conformity assessment body) scores the fishery under consideration against 28 performance indicators that constitutes the MSC fisheries standard. MSC also supports those fisheries desirous of MSC certification but failing to clear the scores as per the MSC fishery score guiding post through Fishery Improvement Programs (FIP).

If you decide to enter MSC assessment, an accredited third party certification body will independently score your fishery against the 28 performance indicators (PIs) that make up the MSC Fisheries Standard. The PIs sit within three core principles: sustainable fish stocks; minimising environmental impact; and effective management, as shown in the assessment tree below.

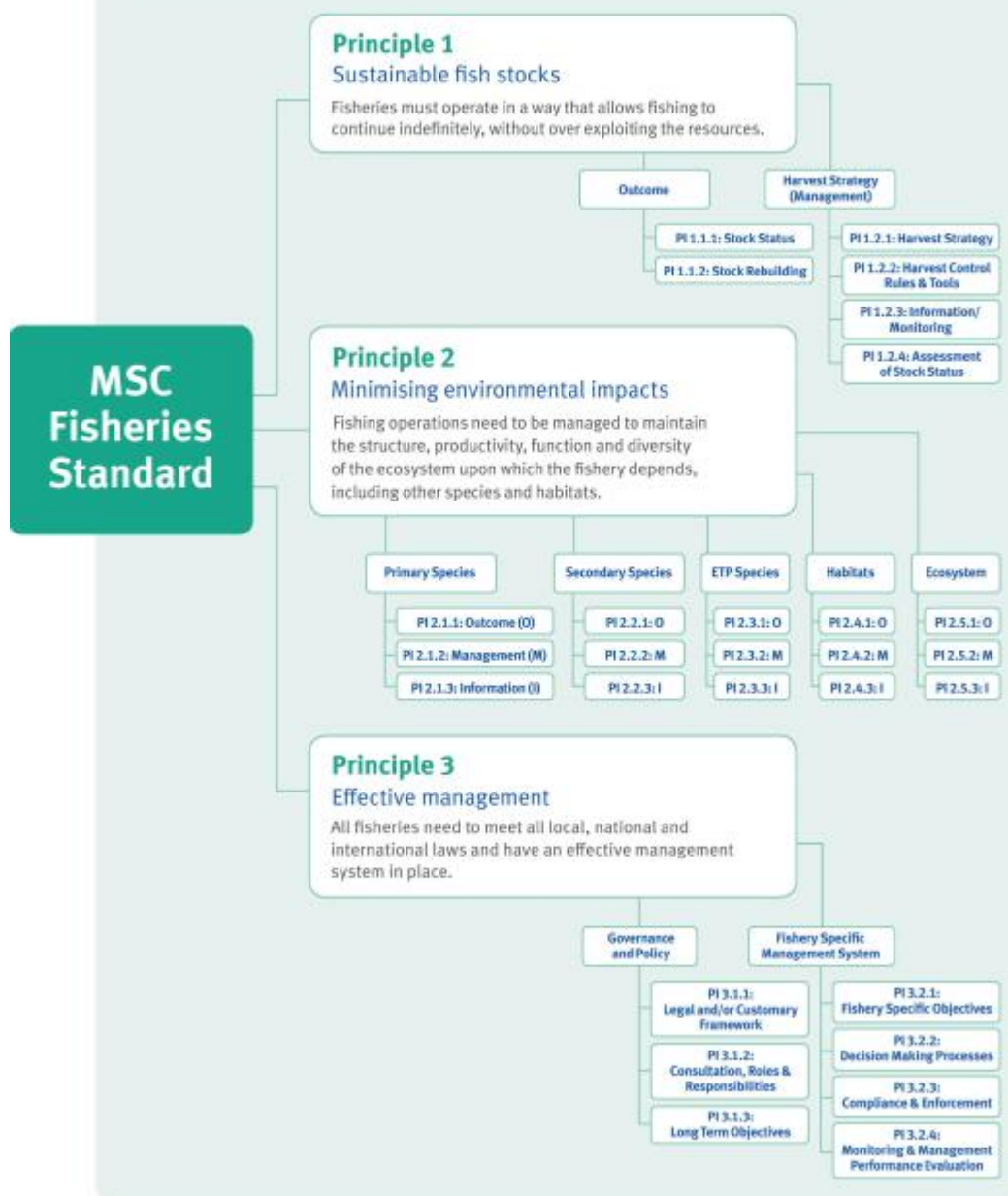


Fig. 1. MSC principles and performance indicators (source : [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org))

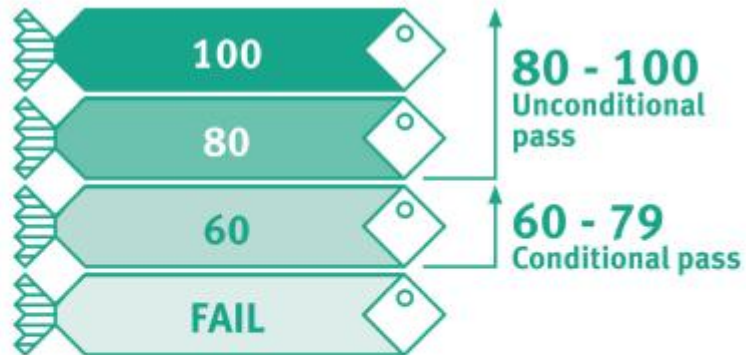


## How does the scoring process work?

Your fishery will be assigned a score for each performance indicator where 60 is the minimum acceptable performance, 80 is global best practice and 100 is near perfect performance.

### In order to be certified, your fishery must score:

- At least 60 for each of the 28 performance indicators
- An average score of 80 across all performance indicators under each of the three principles



If your fishery scores between 60 and 79 for any performance indicator, you will be required to take appropriate action to improve performance against the particular indicator so that it scores 80 or above within a predetermined timeframe (typically five years).

Fig. 2. MSC fishery scoring guideposts (source : [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org))

# 4 steps to a credible FIP

## Supporting fisheries as they move towards MSC certification

Fisheries that are keen to become **MSC certified** but do not yet meet the MSC Fisheries Standard may choose to make the necessary improvements to their operations through a **Fishery Improvement Project (FIP)**. A **credible FIP** involves **four key stages**, each with associated tools and support mechanisms.



### Stakeholder engagement

Stakeholder engagement underpins every stage of the FIP process. Different stakeholder groups need to work together to deliver improvements



### Pre-determined timeframe

There should be a pre-determined limit to the amount of time spent as a FIP. This should generally be no longer than five years



### Stakeholder training

The *Working to MSC certification guide* and *Capacity building training program* equip stakeholders with knowledge to implement successful FIPs



Fig. 3. MSC infographic on fishery improvement project (source : [www.msc.org](http://www.msc.org))



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Dr. Ranjit Suseelan is a Quality, Food safety, Environment & sustainable seafood professional with 28 years of extensive experience in the field of fisheries and aquaculture. He currently heads the Marine Stewardship Council operations in India. He completed his master's degree in Industrial Fisheries and doctorate in Mariculture. Worked in the middle east for the world's largest Integrated Aquaculture project, National Aquaculture Group in Saudi Arabia in the capacity as the Group Head for Quality, Food Safety and Sustainability. Was also spearheading applied R&D, commercialization projects, farming, and processing. Expert in implementation of Systems such as ISO – 9001, ISO 14000, ISO 22000, BRC, HACCP, BAP, Global GAP, ASC and regulatory requirements of Middle East. Also worked as a consultant for many projects of Saudi Government (SFDA, ADMA, SASO & SAS). Has the merit of being Lead (IRCA) Auditor for ISO 22000, ISO 14000 and ISO 9001.

