

Seafood consumers trust ecolabels, but they must be founded on sound science

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Setting minimum requirements for seafood ecolabels is a good idea, says MSC's Camiel Derichs.



The European Parliament's discussion on the feasibility of a European seafood ecolabel has the potential to impact the way the world's oceans are fished. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) has developed the world's most widely recognised and accepted certification and ecolabelling programme for sustainable wild-caught seafood.

Much of our work has been in Europe, where the blue MSC label is now the preferred seafood ecolabel, found on 18,000 seafood products. 50 per cent of MSC certified fisheries and 65 per cent of the MSC certified processors-traders are European. This allows us to provide real insight to the European Parliament's discussions.

The success of our programme results from considerable efforts by and with the scientific community, the fishing industry, processors, conservationists and consumers.

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For two decades, the MSC has aided this diverse group in delivering agreed, credible solutions. Supply chain partners and consumers prefer MSC because we deliver a robust and traceable solution with independently verified sustainability.

As a result, many leading companies - including Sainsbury's, Lidl, Carrefour, Metro and IKEA - have restructured their supply chains to allow them commit to MSC certified seafood.

Recent independent market research has shown that globally, 63 per cent of seafood consumers trust ecolabels. The MSC has earned this trust.

Our programme has contributed to over 600 tangible improvements in oceans including bycatch, habitat impacts, stock management and scientific knowledge. DNA analysis shows 99.6 per cent species accuracy in MSC labelled products. This compares favourably with a global average of only 70 per cent or the 94 per cent reported by the European Commission.

Yet the last decade has seen the development of poorly governed and managed labels, with unsubstantiated claims, with low standards and lacking transparent procedures. These fail to meet the guidelines set by the UN FAO or offer traceability to businesses and consumers.

The European institutions can put an end to this practice by setting minimum requirements. For seafood ecolabels to earn trust, they must be founded on sound science, accountability and stakeholder involvement. Third party verification is essential.

The MSC would therefore welcome a European initiative for setting minimum requirements in establishing and operating seafood ecolabels.

Such requirements should include stakeholder involvement, independent verification, inclusive and transparent assessment procedures and tangible results in marine ecosystems.

It would be unwise to invest in setting up a new European seafood ecolabel. This would run contrary to current public and industry concerns over the proliferation of labels and clarity of the differences between them.

Additional challenges include the significant costs of setting and maintaining standards, quality control of assessments, governance and marketing.

By operating to minimum criteria, seafood ecolabels strongly reinforce and complement the market

mechanism for the Common Fisheries Policy (CFP).

About the author

Camiel Derichs is regional Europe director at the Marine Stewardship Council

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