



Technical note

Really sustainable? Inherent risks of eco-labeling in fisheries

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, there has been a proliferation in environmental, market-based product certification schemes. Typically, certifying bodies provide labels that assure that the products have been extracted or produced using environmentally (and sometimes socially) responsible practices. Ideally, consumers can then make informed choices and select certified products over non-certified. We discuss the advantages as well as the limitations associated with such market-based certification systems drawing on three case studies of Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) certification: the Alaska Pollock Fishery, the Faroe Islands' Saithe Fishery, and the Australian Northern Prawn Fishery. Based on our cases, a key indication is that incentives generated by market forces create a risk of certification schemes making questionable claims in order to increase and retain market shares. Monopolization of the concept of sustainability is an important additional issue. Experience from the MSC demonstrates that standardization of what is considered sustainable creates a monopoly-like situation. This produces a difficult situation for those who are least able to respond to new market requirements as well as those who respond to calls for sustainability in different ways compared to those that have received the approval of a few, large certification schemes such as the MSC.

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1. Introduction

In 1995 Elizabeth Dowdeswell, the then Secretary-General of the United Nations Environment Program, stated that “*the market is replacing our democratic institutions as the key determinant in our society*” (Dowdeswell, 1995). Two decades later, her words ring true and—irrespective of the recent international economic crisis—the market seems more powerful than ever.

The rise of a market economy has also had an impact on natural resource management. In short, in fisheries, the advance of the free market incentivized and gave rise to capital intensive and efficient practices through a push for technological advancements and industrial mode fisheries (Jacquet, 2009). This resulted predominantly in national strategies focusing almost exclusively on large-scale fisheries and a need for an increase in fishing effort and capacity (Carvalho et al., 2011). The end-result has in some countries been the establishment of *de facto* private ownership over future fishing opportunities and the establishment of markets where individual transferable fishing quotas (so-called ITQs)

can be traded to optimize efficiency (Grafton, 1996; Macinko and Bromley, 2004; Andersen et al., 2010).

According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO, 2014), the proportion of assessed marine fish stocks fished within biologically sustainable limits declined from 90% in 1974 to 71.2% in 2011, and there are studies which suggest that these trends are even more pronounced (Froese et al., 2012). According to the same FAO report, almost one third of fish stocks are estimated to be overfished, 61.3% fully fished and 9.9% underfished. As international organizations and national governments have failed to deliver sound fisheries management, various schemes for sustainability labels have been put in place with the intention of giving buyers of fish products the choice to opt for a certified sustainable product (Roheim, 2003). Today, the most important of these is the label administered by the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), which was founded in 1997 to provide fisheries operators with an economic incentive to improve their management and ecological sustainability (Ward and Phillips, 2009).

Many private governance schemes—including transnational eco-labeling schemes—have emerged because of lacking or insufficient international regulation, something which has allowed private actors to increase their impact on international governance (Pattberg, 2005). Examples of issues covered by transnational certification labels include forestry (e.g. Forest Stewardship Council (FSC)); fisheries (e.g. MSC); coffee, tea, cocoa and cotton

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(e.g. Fairtrade); and food production (e.g. Food Alliance and various organic labels). Besides third party certification programs run by private entities, state-run programs have also been put in place; these tend, however, to be associated primarily with individual countries, though the European Union (EU) is increasingly administering such schemes, providing a different example.

The idea behind this approach, which can be termed non-state, market-driven (NSMD) governance (Cashore, 2002), is that progress toward sustainability will result from market incentives and involves an evaluation on the part of those audiences the NMSD system seek to satisfy, such as science experts and environmental groups (Cashore, 2002). In itself, impacts of buying behavior do not appear to provide a convincing explanation for the emergence and spreading of eco-labeling schemes. Rather, their proliferation seems a result of retail chain promotions and their commitment to 'sustainability', helping them to gain more market access and popularity (Gulbrandsen, 2006).

The objective of this article is to explore inherent risks of eco-labels, particularly those of the MSC label. Eco-labels promise to allow consumers to contribute to a more sustainable world but is this always the case? Based on literature and three case studies of MSC certified fisheries, we present and discuss multiple issues that arise from market-based initiatives such as the MSC. Finally, we offer some suggestions for what labelers, retailers, and consumers could do to further support sustainable fishing practices.

2. Methodology

The MSC certified fisheries considered in this article include the Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Alaska Pollock (*Pollachius pollachius*) Fishery, the Faroe Islands Saithe (*Pollachius virens*) Fishery (as part of the Faroe Plateau mixed demersal fishery, which also targets cod (*Gadus morhua*) and haddock (*Melanogrammus aeglefinus*)), and the Australian Northern Prawn Fishery¹ (Hopkins et al., 2013a,b; Hadjimichael et al., 2013a). The cases were selected for the EU research project MYFISH (www.myfishproject.eu) to provide varying perspectives on innovative approaches to fisheries management from outside the European Union. The strength of the selection of case in relation to the topic of this article relates to the differences between the three fisheries. The current article is explorative in nature and the selection of cases provides perspectives from smaller and larger MSC certified fisheries, from various regions of the planet, and from fisheries certified early as well as fisheries certified recently. The limited number of cases means that our findings must, nonetheless, be considered indicative and further research seems warranted to be able to draw 'hard' conclusions.

For each case, we carried out a series of semi-structured interviews (average length of roughly one hour, recorded and transcribed) with stakeholders, including fisheries sector representatives and representatives from environmental and other non-governmental organizations (NGO), fisheries managers and ecologists/biologists associated with the fishery. The interviews, which were held either with individuals or smaller groups of two to five, were guided by a list of partly standardized, partly case-specific themes and questions addressing a range of governance-related topics.

The questions were prepared in conjunction with substantial literature reviews for each case including publications from the MSC. The majority of questions centered on the challenges faced

by each fishery and the potential solutions to each. Questions also addressed the governance system and included extra questions on the perception of the MSC and fishery certification in general. For the Faroe Islands case, 10 interviews with a total of 17 individuals² were conducted during a field trip in August 2012. For the Alaska case, 10 interviews were conducted during a field trip in November and December 2012. For the Australia case, no field trip was undertaken but 10 interviews were conducted—nine by telephone or Skype, and one face to face—in February and March 2013.

3. The Marine Stewardship Council

Motivated primarily by the success of the FSC scheme for responsible management of forests set up in 1996, the MSC was founded by the World Wide Fund for Nature (WWF) and Unilever, one of the world's largest consumer goods companies, in 1997 and became an independent, not-for-profit organization in 1999 (Gulbrandsen, 2009). At the start of 2015, the MSC website indicated that 192 fisheries had been granted MSC certification and 68 fisheries were undergoing assessment. The website noted that the certified fisheries catch a combined total of over 6 million tons of seafood—about 7% of the annual global wild harvest.

The MSC has two 'standards' against which each fishery applying for MSC certification is assessed. On one hand, living up to the MSC fisheries standard, which relates to the sustainability of wild-capture fisheries, allows a fishery to carry the MSC label with the potential 'access to market' benefits. On the other hand, the MSC chain of custody standard relates to traceability rather than sustainability *per se*. Under the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing (i.e. the fisheries standard) (MSC, 2010a, 2013a) are three overarching 'principles' that every fishery must meet: (1) sustainable fish stocks (target species); (2) minimizing environmental impact (ecosystem); and (3) effectiveness of the fishery management system (management). Each principle has three 'scoring guideposts' that define the main performance thresholds in the assessment process.

Assessments against both standards are carried out by accredited certifiers. Following requirements specifying how MSC certifiers should carry out assessments, the certifiers evaluate the fishery against the MSC principles. Fishery clients may choose their own certifiers known as 'conformity assessment bodies' (CABs) from a list approved by MSC.

To be granted an MSC certificate, the fishery client must establish an agreed surveillance program for the fishery. Surveillance 'audits' conducted by a CAB ensure progress toward meeting the required improvements, as well as assessing whether any detrimental changes in the status of the fishery have taken place, which may affect the original assessment. Such audits occur at least annually throughout the five-year certification period. To maintain the MSC certification, a periodic, full re-certification assessment must take place at five-year intervals.

The costs of the certification and audit process are paid by the fishery clients and their associates. The costs increase with the magnitude and complexity of the fishery, with certification costs typically ranging from about USD 15,000 to USD 120,000. After certification, a licensing fee grants the right to use the MSC logo to advertise the carriage, sale and service of MSC-certified products. As a proportion of the MSC budget, this rose seven-fold from 2006 to 2011 (from 7% to 49.9%, amounting to USD 10.2 million) (Christian et al., 2013). On top come the costs of the annual surveillance audits by the CAB and any potential requirements for improvements identified in the assessments.

¹ The fishery includes nine commercial species of prawns, including white banana (*Fenneropenaeus merguensis*), red-legged banana (*Fenneropenaeus indicus*), brown tiger (*Penaeus esculentus*), grooved tiger (*Penaeus semisulcatus*), blue endeavour (*Metapenaeus endeavouri*), and red endeavour (*Metapenaeus ensis*).

² It was not possible to identify any relevant representatives of environmental organisations on the Faroe Islands.

Other stakeholders may participate in the certification process by submitting comments at various stages and may lodge formal objections following the CAB's proposal to certify the fishery (MSC, 2010b). If an objection is filed, an independent adjudicator is selected by the MSC, generally from a roster of independent lawyers, to review the objections. The adjudicator determines whether the objection has grounds for proceeding with 'reasonable ground for success'. Potential objectors, however, must commit to paying an objection fee. For an objection to be upheld, the objector must demonstrate that a serious procedural irregularity occurred and/or that the scoring was not underpinned by the available evidence. By early 2013, only one of 19 formal objections³ lodged proved successful (Christian et al., 2013).

4. Evidence from the three cases

As aforementioned, we solicited opinions on MSC certification (as well as other issues relating to the fisheries and their management) from stakeholders involved with three different MSC certified fisheries. The Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands (BSAI) Alaska Pollock Fishery was one of the first fisheries to receive MSC certification while the Australian Northern Prawn Fishery (NPF) and the Faroe Islands (FI) Saithe Fishery received their certifications more recently. The saithe fishery was in fact only in the process of being assessed when the data for this paper was gathered.

4.1. The Bering Sea and Aleutian Islands Alaska Pollock Fishery

The BSAI Pollock Fishery has been certified as sustainable according to the MSC standards since February 2005. The fishery was one of the first dozen globally to be certified and it remains the largest fishery in the program. The fishery was reassessed in January 2009 and achieved re-certification in December 2010.

According to a fisheries industry representative, the main association representing companies owning and operating offshore catcher/processor vessels of the fishery was approached by the Unilever Corporation (co-founder of the MSC and at the time the largest buyer of whitefish products globally) about submitting the fishery for certification. Before then, there was no developed market demand for sustainably labeled whitefish products but the possibility to develop a market existed. Subsequent to the fishery being certified, all BSAI pollock producers asked to be listed on the certificate and agreed to share the costs of maintaining the certification.

The certification of the pollock fishery was met with objections by environmental NGOs, which formed a coalition to make their voice stronger. The Alaska Oceans Program, Greenpeace International, National Environmental Trust and Oceana objected to the certification of the fishery. In their objection, the NGOs included specific comments on why the pollock fisheries did not comply with the MSC principles and criteria, as well as numerous issues with the MSC certification process itself and reasons why the MSC was in a "desperate need of reform". In the objection, the coalition stated: "Certifying a fishery with a history of depleted stocks, significant ecosystem impacts and staggering management problems is a grave error. The pollock fisheries and their management are not models for the world's fisheries. In so many ways, their problems provide examples of how not to conduct fisheries" (MSC, 2004, p.73) The MSC Board of Trustees decided that there was no basis to allow an objection to be heard on procedural grounds, and no independent Objections panel was established (MSC, 2004).

Objections were also put forward during the reassessment of the fishery in 2010 by a coalition of NGOs (Oceana, Ocean Conservancy, Greenpeace U.S. and WWF). They stated in their objections that the certification body did not fully evaluate the impacts of the fishery on the habitat or the ecosystem. The objections suggested also that the potential impacts of the BSAI Pollock Fishery on endangered and threatened species were not being adequately addressed within the current management framework. The coalition also argued that the analysis, upon which the certification body based the ranking of habitat impacts from the fishery, was flawed and narrowly referencing the environmental impact statement (EIS), on which the ranking was based. Thus, it failed to show the long-term reductions in habitat quality as a result of the BSAI pollock fishery⁴.

In 2011, an initiative by the offshore catcher/processors, the nearshore catcher fleet, and the shore-based processors led to certification by the Alaska Seafood Marketing Institute (ASMI) after independent third-party assessment by Global Trust Certification of the Alaska Pollock Fishery. The decision to apply came after several major processors decided that they no longer wanted to pay for MSC certification after eight large Alaska salmon processors allowed their MSC certificate to expire to carry only the ASMI accreditation. The certification of the Russian Sea of Okhotsk Pollock Fishery in January 2013 (O'Boyle et al., 2013) has been another recent event, which raised a number of issues regarding the credibility of the MSC in the eyes of the U.S. fishing industry. Both WWF (which subsequently withdrew) and the At-sea Processors Association submitted formal objections to the proposed MSC draft certification. The Independent adjudicator appointed a CAB to review the objections, which "cleared the way for the fishery to be certified to the MSC standard as a sustainable and well-managed fishery" (MSC, 2013b).

4.2. The Australian Northern Prawn Fishery

The Australian NPF entered full assessment for MSC certification in May 2011 and achieved MSC certification in November 2012. It became the first tropical prawn fishery in the world to be certified as sustainable and achieved one of the highest scores so far seen in any MSC fishery assessment, with a score of more than 95 out of 100, over all three certification principles under the MSC environmental standard for sustainable fishing (MRAG, 2012).

In contrast to the BSAI pollock fishery, no objections were filed for the NPF. From our research, the following reasons appear plausible as to why there were none. The NPF had a long and positive history of working closely with Australian environmental NGO stakeholders to reduce bycatch, particularly of threatened, endangered and protected (TEP) species. In addition, environmental NGO representatives believed that it was important to have a tropical prawn fishery assessed for certification and demonstrate that it is possible for such fisheries to meet MSC standards; this despite the fishery having the third highest bycatch (discard weight per landed target catch weight) in the FAO's 1994 global assessment of fisheries bycatch and discards (Alverson et al., 1994). A typical tiger prawn trawl haul, for example, consists of 50–90% discards (mainly fish) (MRAG, 2012).

For the NPF, the WWF was a co-client for the assessment with NPF Industry Pty., Ltd., which is a cooperative for the fishing fleet, and provided technical and financial support throughout the MSC accreditation process. The assessment of the NPF was, furthermore, partly funded by the retail chain Woolworths Australia. Accord-

⁴ According to the EIS, trawling by the BSAI pollock fishery was estimated to cause a permanent reduction of 4.6% of the biostructure averaged across all sand/mud habitat and 7.2% of the biostructure averaged across all slope habitat in the Bering Sea (NMFS, 2005).

³ Objections for which the objection fee was paid for.

ing to written comments to us from an industry representative, the fact that Woolworths made an announcement committing to sustainable sourcing and ended up co-investing in the certification gave them “a power point of differentiation and ‘first mover advantage’ in pressing on [with the certification]” (Quote 1, fisheries sector, written). Moreover, being a bottom trawl fishery with a high bycatch percentage by biomass, the operators in the NPF felt that independent certification would provide a ‘social license’—thereby fending off environmental NGO criticism concerning the issue of bycatch—and affirm the good practices of the fishery. According to a different industry representative, the industry felt that it was important to document that “*the fishery is working pro-actively to do the right thing and being seen to do the right thing. This helps us attract and retain good people and keeps the NGO community from being too critical*” (Quote 2, fisheries sector, written).

Enthusiasm over MSC accreditation was evident not only during our interviews with the industry but also from press releases when the fishery was certified in December 2012. It appeared important for the NPF to differentiate themselves from their competitors by way of the MSC certification, especially considering the increased global demand for ‘sustainable’ products. Therefore, with MSC certification, the industry’s expectations encompassed increases in both prices and demand for their products but also improvements in the reputation of the industry. Overall, the NPF case appears to be an example of a complex set of motivations that reflects the win–win logic, which is often flagged when discussing environmental certifications: the environment is better off, and the producers receive a price premium for contributing to this while simultaneously improving the reputation of the fishery. At the same time, this specific certification could still be questioned over the high percentage of bycatch and the impact of the fishery on the seafloor.

4.3. The Faroe Islands Saithe Fishery

The FI Saithe Fishery was entered for full MSC assessment in April 2012 with P/F JFK and P/F Faroe Origin as the clients. The assessment process was successfully completed—with no objections filed—during spring 2013 and the fishery became ‘conditionally’ certified in June 2013. In contrast to the case of the northern prawn fishery, however, the lack of objections in the Faroese situation should not be taken as an indication that the assessment was not contentious. Rather, among our three cases, the FI Saithe Fishery case may be regarded as the most contentious.

The International Council for Exploration of the Sea (ICES, an intergovernmental organization providing advice on fishery and environmental management) considers that the FI saithe stock is harvested unsustainably. This regards the fishing mortality exerted on the stock, according to the precautionary approach, and that fishing levels are above target levels according to a maximum sustainable yield approach (ICES ACOM, 2013). Given ICES’ reservations, it appears surprising that no objection was received. This is likely explained by the fact that the fishery is relatively small and confined to Faroese waters, where—as we experienced when looking for interviewees—virtually no environmental NGOs are operating in relation to fishing. This highlights that the level of scrutiny that an assessment is subjected to depends on the local context of the fishery.

In contrast to the other cases analyzed, enthusiasm for MSC certification appeared in general limited among fishing industry stakeholders on the Faroe Islands. The least negative perception of the MSC was found among processing companies and vertically integrated businesses, of which some have experiences from participating in MSC certified fisheries outside the Faroese EEZ, but even here enthusiasm appeared low:

“We have a representative in [cityname] where we sell our fish and he meets more and more people and they say: ‘It has to be MSC. Without MSC it is no good’. I do not think it changes anything for the fish whether it is MSC or not. But it does change things for the fisher. . . You know, MSC has managed to get customers in England, Germany, France. . . [. . .]. They have made them understand that this is important, and therefore you have to do it. Personally, I think a lot of it is silly. . .” (Quote 3, fisheries sector, translated).

This presents a more reluctant, pragmatic attitude toward MSC than in the other cases presented. The MSC is seen, rather than a business opportunity (‘pull’), as a necessity that the fishery sector simply has to embrace (‘push’) to maintain its current position, as MSC is increasingly monopolizing the market.

Some parts of the Faroese industry, in particular but not exclusively the small-scale near-shore fleet, remain highly skeptical and even hostile toward the MSC. The types of criticism that the FI respondents raised can be sorted into two categories: (1) the criteria upon which a fishery is deemed eligible or not eligible for certification; and (2) the MSC as an organization and the way it operates.

It was argued for example that the fisheries that receive the MSC certificate are not fully sustainable and that the choice of criteria to some extent is arbitrary or even designed so as to allow only “*the most profitable [for the MSC] fisheries to be certified*” (Quote 4, fisheries sector, translated). As evidence, respondents mentioned the lack of (or at least lack of weight on) criteria related to ‘fair trade’ or social standards, the lack of criteria related to fuel consumption and related greenhouse gas emissions, and that the MSC certifies fisheries with high discard rates (*c.f.* the NPF) or—compared to passive gear—high bottom impact (*i.e.* trawl fisheries).

The second stream of criticism related to the MSC as an organization, with one respondent indicating that the MSC exploits its strategic position between the fishers and the market (retailers) to put massive pressure on uncertified (but nevertheless, in the respondent’s eyes, sustainable) fisheries. The same respondent also pointed out that, in his opinion, MSC is not a democratic organization and that it is generally too costly for small fisheries to enter into the process of MSC certification.

5. Discussion

Eco-labeling was marketed as an important component of a solution to address the impacts of a deregulated globalized economy and the deregulated flow of goods and resources. However, certification schemes often subordinate the ‘beneficiaries’ of the certification, be that the environment, the producers, or both, to the demands of consumers and the market more broadly (Getz and Shreck, 2006). For the MSC in particular, a number of criticisms regarding the potential implications of its certification imperfections appear to be valid and related to its nature as a market-tool. Incentives created by economic liberalization in combination with capitalist globalization have led certification schemes to make unfounded claims in order to create accountability for themselves and hold on to their market position. The rise of the MSC as the leading eco-label for seafood created a fear over access to markets, particularly in the fishing sector of a number of Western countries. For the three case studies presented here, access to markets appears to be the main reason for applying for MSC certification. It is evident, however, that the degree of enthusiasm for MSC certification varies widely. The U.S. BSAI pollock and the Australian NPF industry stakeholders were happy to apply for certification; the pollock fishery to satisfy their buyers who played a central role in the MSC and at that time represented the main customer base; and the NPF to distinguish itself from similar produce from Asia with a bad reputation. The FI Saithe Fishery applied for MSC certifica-

tion as it felt there was no alternative for keeping access to foreign markets. The change of attitude within the U.S. pollock industry is noteworthy. The sea-based catcher/processor sector behind the original MSC pollock certification lost faith in the label during the ongoing Russian Sea of Okhotsk pollock dispute. The land-based pollock processing sector, supported by the near-shore catchers delivering to it, has opted for a different label (ASMI), which highlights the Alaskan locality of their product. In addition, small-scale fisheries are often lacking the economic or organizational capacity to facilitate potential certification, and are thus excluded from parts of the market (Jacquet and Pauly, 2008; Hadjimichael et al., 2013b).

Another issue related to the business-oriented model of a structure like the MSC is transparency. The issue arises when in order to make it simple for consumers, there is an incentive not only to abbreviate the information provided for a fishery but also the information regarding the specific criteria on which the certification actually depends. The MSC criteria encompass other key factors which the public/consumers are highly concerned about besides the state of the target stocks, namely the direct and indirect impacts of fisheries on non-target species, habitats and ecosystems. As seen from the objections put forward in the BSAI pollock case these issues can often at the center of the debate and disagreement. On bycatch/discards and for example in the case of salmon bycatch from the pollock industry (particularly Chinook salmon), there was a disagreement as although the bycatch is proportionately relatively small, there are concerns on its effects on the viability of some stocks of salmon⁵ (Rice et al., 2010). Social issues also arise as the Chinook salmon is vital for the subsistence of some indigenous Alaskan communities (Gisclair, 2009). For the NPF, the issue of 'bulk biomass' discarding of non-TEP bycatch has not yet been handled effectively even though it is on the agenda for the Australian Fisheries Management Authority and its collaborating scientists (Bensley et al., 2010). A certain proportion of consumers, for example, likely links 'sustainable fishing' with non-trawling fishing practices. Knowing that trawling is not *per se* a problem in terms of getting an MSC certificate could make this consumer group consider exploring different ways of choosing their fish, such as consulting the Greenpeace Red List (Greenpeace, 2014). Also, consumers may, when confronted with the lack of socio-economic criteria in the label, opt for fishery products, which they see as supportive to 'broader' elements of sustainability currently lacking from the MSC standards.

The incentive to satisfy the demand of expanding markets provides an additional incentive to 'go big' by opting for larger and more industrialized fisheries. With an expanding market and increasing seafood-demand, a label has an 'incentive to certify', and, as seen from the case of the MSC (and specifically the case of the Faroe Islands), this can lead to certification by anticipation ('conditionality') of being able to meet the prescribed 'sustainability' criteria. Queries have also been raised about a lack of clarity and consistency in the interpretation of the standards in some of the fisheries accepted for MSC certification (Ward, 2008; Jacquet et al., 2010; Froese and Proelss, 2012; Christian et al., 2013). The financial obstacles are not only for those wishing to certify but also for those wishing to formally object to certification. The challenge of meeting the objection fee (about USD 8000) and mobilizing the means needed to mount a serious objection favor resource-rich organizations. This, coupled with the low odds for success, function as a *de facto* deterrent. In other cases, objections are likely not filed because

no one (i.e. NGOs) are there to file them; the FI Saithe Fishery may very well be an example of this.

6. Really sustainable?

This article uses the example of the MSC to suggest and discuss some of the inherent risks of eco-labeling in fisheries, whose regional and global nature add a significant challenge to governance. Focusing on three very different MSC certified fisheries, common problems and issues have been identified. Experiences from the MSC indicate that standardization of what is sustainable through a market-tool creates a pressure to certify with precarious consequences for those who are least able to respond to the new market requirements. Additionally, other caveats, which are particularly associated with the increasing popularity of the MSC, include an inclination to certify even if questionable and to go for big over small fisheries in order to satisfy the increased demand in certified products. Additionally, smaller fisheries often cannot afford the high certification costs and are thus not able to apply. Finally, there is also the tendency not to be completely open about what the certification does not cover. Consequently, the associated monopolization of the market is a common phenomenon when a labeling initiative is introduced to the market. Additionally, when a label becomes so strong that it dominates the market, there is also the danger that the concept that the label is meant to be certifying (in the case of the MSC, sustainable fisheries), is appropriated by the label itself, thus the label becoming synonymous to this concept. The consequence of this is that the label can result in the monopolization of the concept of sustainability.

In 2013, the MSC committed itself to undertake a review of its fisheries standard and launched a program improvement website to engage with anyone interested in providing comments⁶. Though a number of improvements are suggested and will probably lead to policy changes within the MSC certification system, none of them relate to the issues highlighted in this paper. As an example, we would argue that the MSC itself should be more open about the limitations of its label to allow consumers to understand what 'sustainable' means according to the MSC. As a step, the MSC could commission the production of a website MSC leaflet explaining what the 'MSC is not', i.e. what aspects of sustainability the label does not cover. The leaflet should obviously be as easily accessible on the MSC website as information about what the label does deliver.

Alternatives to the MSC have seen a rise; examples include ASMI, which is mentioned in the pollock case, and the Sustainable Seafood Coalition (SSC), a new UK-based initiative whose labeling code is "designed to give consumers certainty about what environmental claims on fish and seafood mean"⁷, and many others. Another example, this time of a grassroot alternative strategy to MSC, is that of Thorupstrand Kystfiskerlaug (TK) (The guild of Thorupstrand coastal fisheries), a fishermen's cooperative (self-organized within an ITQ-system) situated in the small fishing village of Thorupstrand in the northwestern part of Jutland, Denmark. The trademark of TK fishermen is that they take short trips fishing with energy-efficient gear with low environmental impact and use smaller, traditional coastal vessels that are dragged on to the beach (the last place in Denmark where this kind of fishery takes place) (Thorupstrand Kystfiskerlaug, 2015). Since TK fishers wanted to differentiate themselves from other Danish fisheries (which are almost all/or are in the process of becoming MSC certified), they have so far chosen not to carry the MSC brand, but to rather develop an own brand in a strategic partnership with the big consumer-

⁵ The direct effects of the fishery on the sustainability of Chinook salmon populations is difficult to interpret without information on the river of origin of the bycatch, and no studies have yet been undertaken (Rice et al., 2010).

⁶ <http://improvements.msc.org>.

⁷ <http://sustainableseafoodcoalition.org>.

controlled Danish retail chain Coop (Jensen, 2015; Thorupstrand Kystfiskerlaug, 2015).

When compared against internationally agreed reference points, a substantial fraction of seafood stocks certified by the MSC prior to 2012 had no recent information about stock status (11%) and 31% of the stocks with available data were overfished and were currently subject to overfishing (Froese and Proelss, 2012). Despite this being a self-defeating trait of the MSC and what the label is meant to represent, it also highlights the fact that fisheries certification alone is unlikely to arrest the decline of fish stocks, and that potential solutions likely have to be part of an intersection of private and public efforts to address overfishing and environmental harm resulting from fishing (Gulbrandsen, 2009). It is also up to the different countries that have the legal responsibility for controlling and managing marine resources to facilitate and implement management changes necessary to meet the sustainability standards. National fisheries management will have to precede the *ad hoc* development of certified fisheries, as the latter may meet retail needs for the trade but fail as the sole stimulus for the wider-reaching global improvement of fisheries management (Gardiner and Viswanathan, 2004). On one hand, some of the new labels might have lower standards than the MSC. On the other however, the MSC certifies fisheries which as shown by Froese and Proelss (2012), do not necessarily follow the internationally agreed standards, and thus not comply with the standards of their respective countries. Thus, labels are not per definition particularly helpful in the societal struggle for sustainable fisheries.

Though supported by other literature, the findings of this study can due to the small number of case studies simply evoke (some of) the problematic issues of labels and particularly of the MSC. These are, however, issues which deserve more attention in future research. At the same time, whilst important to focus on and investigate the issue of labels, we must not fail to place it and appreciate it as part of a bigger problem of overfishing, failing national policies, and globalized markets.

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