



## Promoting diversity and inclusiveness in seafood certification and ecolabelling: Prospects for Asia

### A B S T R A C T

Building on the inputs by a range of experts who participated in the February 2017 international symposium on “Designing the Future for Fisheries Certification Schemes” at the University of Tokyo, this manuscript traces the origins of fisheries certification schemes, relevant developments, and remaining challenges from an Asian perspective. Over the past 20 years, seafood certification has emerged as a powerful tool for meeting growing demands for sustainable fisheries and aquaculture products. Despite broad consensus among countries regarding what constitute responsible fishing practices, the fisheries certification landscape remains uneven. A plethora of certification schemes has generated confusion among consumers and retailers, and capital-intensive certification schemes may be out-of-reach or impractical for some small-scale fisheries, particularly within the developing world. A recent initiative by the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI) is aiming to address the diversity within the certification landscape by creating a tool to benchmark certification schemes that are in line with the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries and other relevant agreed FAO guidelines on fisheries, ecolabelling and aquaculture. Countries in Asia are among the world's top consumers and exporters of seafood, yet have faced some particular challenges with regard to seafood certification, underscoring the need for certification schemes that account for regional and local conditions and management practices, particularly with regard to small-scale fisheries.

### 1. Introduction

On 3 February 2017, an international symposium was convened at The University of Tokyo on ‘Designing the Future for Fisheries Certification Schemes’. This conference report covers the presentations and discussions by practitioners, government officials, representatives of non-governmental organizations, and members of the academic community who were in attendance, while also highlighting gaps and future research directions. Drawing on lessons learned and good practices from existing certification schemes, participants engaged in practical discussions of how common objectives of sustainable resource management, cost-effective and meaningful certification and inclusiveness can be better achieved in the future. Although the symposium and this report place a particular focus on the context of fisheries and aquaculture in Asia, they only scratch the surface of the diversity of socio-ecological features across this region as well as the variety of fisheries and aquaculture production activities. For Asia occupies a particularly interesting position in the landscape of fisheries certification due to the scale of its involvement in fisheries and aquaculture activities as well as its fish consumption rates. Asia is home to 84% of the world's fishers and fish farmers, and is responsible for some 90% of the world's aquaculture production [8]. Four of the top ten exporters of fish and fishery products are located in Asia, over 70% of the world's fish and fishery products are consumed in Asia [8], and the region includes many of the most vulnerable countries to climate change impacts on fisheries [4]. Yet demand within Asia for certified fish and fishery products lags behind rates in other regions, particularly Europe and North America, suggesting an unevenly developed certification landscape, but one with vast potential if it can gain greater traction in Asia.

Capture fisheries and aquaculture play a vital role in global food security, providing some 167 million tons of seafood for consumption each year [8]. They provide 17% of the global population's animal protein, and a host of micronutrients crucial for human well-being, particularly in developing countries [8,15]. Per capita fish consumption has more than doubled since 1961, and demand continues to grow, with projections that an additional 20 million tons of seafood will be needed by 2030 to meet demand [46]. In addition to the health and nutritional benefits of consuming fish, fisheries also form the backbone of many communities in countries across the developing and industrialized world, directly employing around 58 million people, and touching the livelihoods of around 10–12% of the global population [8].

Although the crucial socio-economic importance of the fisheries and aquaculture sector is well-documented, considerable uncertainty and debate exists about the current state of fish stocks around the world as well as the sustainability of various aquaculture activities [6,36,48]. Within this context, there has been growing interest in reliable schemes for certifying sustainable fisheries and aquaculture products that do not overexploit natural resources or damage ecosystem productivity [26]. While sustainable fisheries and aquaculture activities may be in the long-term interest of all, considerable challenges exist with regard to designing and implementing certification schemes, as well as monitoring continued compliance over time.

This report is divided into several sections, beginning with an overview of the origins of fishery certification schemes and the relevant international guidelines and frameworks. It continues by covering symposium presentations that focused on increasing diversity and stringency within seafood certification schemes, and lessons learned from efforts to certify individual fisheries. The report then goes into detail on presentations that addressed the certification landscape in Asia, and draws on presentations from individual countries to highlight the barriers and opportunities to certification. The report concludes by emphasizing the need to expand research efforts across Asia to track, among other things, shifts in consumer

behavior and the continuing evolution of the fishery certification landscape.

## 2. Origins of fishery certification schemes

The high-profile collapse of the Newfoundland cod fishery in the early 1990s and mismanagement of fish stocks in the North Sea, which led to sustained loss of revenues, have been pointed to as a crucial catalyst for the development of fishery certification schemes [2,5,14]. Such paradigms of unsustainable fisheries management coupled with a growing preference for a market-based approach [7,43] created a sense of urgency in taking global action to guard against such negative outcomes in fisheries. It also provided impetus for the negotiations that led to the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries (CCRF) in 1995 [28]. The CCRF recognized that the world's fisheries had “become a market-driven, dynamically developing sector of the food industry [and that by the] late 1980s it became clear [...] that fisheries could no longer sustain such rapid and often uncontrolled exploitation and development” [13].

Crucially, the CCRF explicitly called for the application of a precautionary approach to “conservation, management and exploitation of living aquatic resources”. It furthermore specified that the “absence of adequate scientific information should not be used as a reason for postponing or failing to take measures to conserve target species, associated or dependent species and the environment” [13]. At the core of the CCRF, therefore, was an emphasis on ensuring that fisheries products were not originating from unsustainable fisheries practices [42].

Although the CCRF is voluntary, its adoption by over 170 member states points to considerable consensus on what constitutes good fisheries management. Broad agreement does not necessarily translate into common action, however, raising questions about compliance and accountability. The creation of certification and ecolabelling schemes for seafood that has been harvested based on sustainable practices has provided one solution to this challenge [42].

On this basis, in early 1996, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Unilever (a multi-national consumer goods company and major purchaser of frozen fish) signed a statement of intent “to ensure the long-term viability of global fish populations and the health of the marine ecosystem on which they depend” [47], which would ultimately lead to the establishment of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) in 1997<sup>1</sup> and the creation of the MSC Fisheries Standard in 1998 [32]. In its current form, the standard includes a set of 28 performance indicators meant to determine whether the fishery meets three guiding principles, namely:

- (1) *The fishing activity must be at a level which ensures it can continue indefinitely*
- (2) *Fishing operations must be managed to maintain the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem*
- (3) *The fishery must comply with relevant laws and have a management system that is responsive to changing circumstances* [33]

By 2016, the MSC Standard had been used to certify 281 fisheries in 33 countries, comprising some 9.4% of global wild catch [31]. The high profile of MSC and a growing demand for sustainable seafood has led several major retailers to opt to exclusively sell products certified by MSC, triggering other smaller companies to take similar steps [35,40].

Yet the MSC Standard has not proven to be a panacea, and despite documented improvements in the performance of some of its certified fisheries, this has not always been the case [1]. Some criticism has also arisen about the MSC Standard due to high costs of certification, a perceived tendency towards certifying fisheries that rely on high-impact fishing techniques, and the potential for loose interpretation of MSC performance indicators by independent certifiers [16,19], although some of these criticisms are disputed (e.g. [17,22]).

## 3. Efforts to foster diversity and stringency within seafood certification schemes

The seafood certification landscape has changed substantially over the past 20 years. For one thing, there has been a rapid growth in the number of seafood certification schemes (over 140 by one count), some targeted to a single region, species, or type of fishery, and this profusion of schemes has generated confusion in the marketplace [40]. Consumers are unfamiliar with the implications of certain labels, and retailers struggle to determine the reliability of different labels [20,21]. To address industry and state concerns about poor practices, the FAO responded to calls for a firmer basis for ecolabelling and stricter requirements of the associated third-party certifying structure by producing the FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries [12] (Revised in 2009), FAO Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Inland Fisheries [11] and the FAO Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification [10].

An innovative approach to eliminating confusion among consumers, retailers and producers due to the rapid increase in certification schemes has been introduced by the Global Sustainable Seafood Initiative (GSSI).<sup>2</sup> Acting as a global platform and partnership of relevant organizations and experts interested in increasing seafood sustainability, GSSI has developed a benchmark for recognizing seafood certification schemes that are in line with three key FAO documents derived from the CCRF: the Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries, the Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Inland Fisheries, and the Technical Guidelines on Aquaculture Certification. Although widely accepted and adopted, none of these documents provides a checklist for identifying rigorous certification schemes with robust standards to certify fisheries or aquaculture practices, or rigorous certification schemes, and the first contribution of the GSSI has been to operationalize these into a Global Benchmark Tool. Using a transparent process and set of Essential Components, this tool makes it possible to determine whether certification schemes are in line with FAO guidelines.

The GSSI therefore aims to make it possible to apply rigorous standards that are directly derived from FAO documents to the great diversity of certification schemes tailored to specific regional conditions, fisheries, or management practices. Such an approach can foster diversity in the certification landscape, while at the same time giving seafood companies the assurance that certification schemes are in line with relevant FAO guidelines. Launched in October 2015, to date the Global Benchmark Tool has been used to recognize three seafood certification schemes, the Alaska Responsible Fisheries Management (RFM) Certification Program<sup>3</sup> and the Iceland Responsible Fisheries (IRF) Management Certification Programme<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> <https://www.msc.org/>.

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ourgssi.org/>.

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.alaskaseafood.org/rfm-certification/>.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.responsiblefisheries.is/certification/>.

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