

THE PROMISE AND FAILURE OF SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD -- IS THE MARINE STEWARDSHIP COUNCIL CERTIFYING FISHERIES TO CAPTURE SEA TURTLES?

Marydele Donnelly

Sea Turtle Conservancy, Gainesville, FL, USA

In 1999, two years after its founding by the World Wildlife Fund and the European food giant Unilever, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) became an independent non-profit organization established to recognize and reward sustainable fishing and influence choices made by seafood consumers. Since that time, the MSC has awarded its blue eco-label for sustainability to 98 fisheries around the world; an additional 131 fisheries are currently undergoing assessment. MSC is well-known to consumers in the USA, Canada, UK, Germany, France and Japan and is regarded as the best of the seven organizations certifying sustainable, wild-caught seafood. Nevertheless, consumers deserve better fare than what the MSC currently serves. Despite its potential to promote better fishing, conservationists are becoming increasingly critical of the MSC for certifying fisheries that are not truly sustainable. In an opinion piece in *Nature* (467, 28-29; 2 September 2010) leading scientists call for "radical reform" of the MSC to protect the environment. Pelagic longline fisheries hook and entangle hundreds of thousands of sea turtles each year, but two of these fisheries in the Northwest Atlantic, the Canadian swordfish fishery and the U.S. yellowfin and bigeye tuna and swordfish fishery, are currently undergoing MSC assessment as sustainable fisheries. These assessments exemplify the way in which economic interests are driving MSC to the detriment of the environment. The small Canadian fleet is estimated to have caught 9,592 loggerheads between 1999 and 2006, with interactions increasing over time to 3,368 in 2006. The majority of these turtles are released alive, but post-release mortality can be as high as 40-50%. This assessment has been severely criticized; it is still in the final assessment phase six months after the final report was due. The larger U.S. fleet undergoing assessment is implicated in hundreds of sea turtle interactions each year; post-hooking mortality in U.S. fisheries, which have numerous mandatory requirements to improve the turtles' chances of survival, are estimated to be 20-25%. Under MSC, each fishery is assessed by independent reviewers using an established step-by-step process and performance indicators with explicit goals. Key elements include information gathering and monitoring, the development of a management strategy, prevention of irreversible harm, species recovery, and minimal levels of mortality in non-target species. Assessments allow for ample time to comment, and MSC assessors accept comments from all stakeholders. A major flaw, however, is that assessors are financially motivated to take fisheries undergoing assessment to the next step in the process. Challenges to final assessments are difficult, and ultimately, the inclusion of more fisheries is lucrative for MSC. As envisioned by its founders, the MSC is valuable, but it is clear significant changes in the assessment process are needed. Information on how the sea turtle community can become more engaged with the MSC and recommendations for MSC reform will be provided.