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Fair Trade vs MSC: A Fair Comparison?

19 January 2016

Widely accepted as the most reliable ecolabel currently available for tuna and other seafood products, receiving accreditation from the Marine Stewardship Council is aspired to by many fisheries throughout the world. However the procedure can be a very costly process both in time and money; and could Fair Trade be a viable alternative for small fisheries?

In a new research paper released by the BESTTuna program at Wageningen University, this very topic is investigated, and criticisms of MSC's payment structure and data intensive criteria are analyzed for their poor inclusion of developing country fisheries.

The report, "Fishers, Fair Trade and finding middle ground", notes that currently less than 10 percent of MSC's 200 certified fisheries are found in developing nations, and explores a seemingly potential alternative; the first ever Fair Trade USA fishery, which catches yellowfin tuna via the handline method in Indonesia.

Despite focusing the main body of the certification on a traditional aspect of Fair Trade certifications, and what the report calls "the paradoxical role of the middlemen", who provide the tuna fishermen with a price for their goods, the report notes that a Fair Trade fishery certification does in fact take into account what it calls "resource management", and a level of environmental responsibility.

These environmental requirements for certification gradually increase following the year that Fair Trade status is granted to the fishery,



however minimum standards for initial certification include defining any potential bycatch species, ensuring the primary species for capture is not "endangered, threatened or protected" and that explosives, cyanide and other poisons are not used in fishing.

It is not until the end of the first year of certification that the primary species caught in the fishery is evaluated for overfishing, and not until the end of year three that overfishing is evaluated for any secondary or bycatch species. Year six into the certification sees the introduction of an annual meeting and review between all involved, marking the first time a gathering is held with the certificate holder, the fisher association and the Fair Trade Committee.

The recent report which focuses on the Indonesian fishery states that despite having resource management measures of its own in place, the overall aim of the Fair Trade accreditation is that the fishery will "improve over time and eventually reach a level of environmental sustainability consistent with Marine Stewardship Council certification."

Speaking to *atuna.com*, lead author of the study, Dr Megan Bailey, says that the Fair Trade Fishery Certification standard includes ecological targets, "but obviously not to the extent that MSC does." She states that thus far, despite the benefits it can bring, she is not entirely convinced about the ability of Fair Trade to completely "revolutionize the sustainability of small scale fisheries."

As a result, research is ongoing at Dalhousie University in Canada in connection with the BESTTuna program to further understand the process of Fair Trade helping to pave the way to MSC in year six of its program, but more data is reportedly needed before solid conclusions can be drawn.

The current report released concludes that a Fair Trade fishery certification can address criticisms that larger bodies, such as MSC, are not designed with small-scale developing countries in mind, as well as identifying the importance of middlemen in these small communities, which it states MSC certifications do not cover adequately.

However a Fair Trade certification does not replace the thorough assessment involved in gaining and maintaining MSC accreditation, and could result in confused consumers, as many believe that there are already too many ecolabels ([/index.php/en/2-news/4010-could-eu-soon-start-its-own-seafood-eco-label?highlight=WYJlY29sYWJlbnMlXQ=#.Vp4KDZorIhE](#)) present on tuna and other fisheries products.

Bailey says however that it is unlikely shoppers will get confused about the label, and states: "Consumers think they know exactly what they are getting when they purchase coffee or chocolate with the Fair Trade or Fair Trade USA logo. I think the same would be true of fish."

Due to it already being a fairly well known ecolabel, she states that Fair Trade tuna should do well in the marketplace, but acknowledges that at the present time it doesn't have a huge amount of sales: "Firstly it's because it's very expensive," she states, "and secondly because there is only one product, so consumers don't even really know to look for it."

Despite its numerous shortcomings in terms of stock management, it seems that Fair Trade tuna could be a new product making its way onto our shelves in the coming years. However although it might be considered a good stepping stone to MSC accreditation, it is not likely to overtake the widely acclaimed Marine Stewardship Council certification scheme any time soon.

Read the full report on Fair Trade tuna fisheries from the Dalhousie and Wageningen Universities here (<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0165783615301508>).