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Consumer trust in Marine Stewardship Council Certification hangs in the balance

NEW CONSUMER POLL RESULTS ON SUSTAINABLE SEAFOOD LABEL IN FOUR EUROPEAN COUNTRIES RELEASED

[BRUSSELS, BELGIUM] – A new poll commissioned by members of the Make Stewardship Count coalition indicates that the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) could face significant loss of consumer confidence given the manner in which the certification body is handling a number of critical issues, including the bycatch of endangered and threatened species, the deliberate encirclement of dolphins, shark finning and habitat destruction.

The poll was conducted for the groups by YouGov Deutschland GmbH from April 12 to 19, 2018; 5574 people in France, Germany, Switzerland and the UK were polled, and the results were weighted, and are representative of the adult (+18) population in each country. The Make Stewardship Count coalition is releasing the results during the 2018 Seafood Expo Global/Seafood Processing Global event currently underway in Brussels.

While opinions vary slightly between the countries, an average of 76 percent of respondents believe certification agents who review an MSC fishery can't be truly independent when paid by that fishery, and 77 percent of consumers responding expect MSC certified fisheries to independently verify and document all of their bycatch and provide data to NGOs and scientists.

When asked whether an MSC fishery should be allowed to deliberately encircle dolphins or other marine species whilst fishing for tuna, a resounding 80 percent of respondents said that such a practice should not be allowed. Similar results were found for the use of FADs leading to shark kills and bycatch of endangered or threatened species. Shark finning and the use of destructive fishing techniques scored exceptionally high as well, with on average over 85 percent of respondents across all countries saying these practices should be banned.

The Marine Stewardship Council is under increasing scrutiny by a growing number of marine conservation, species, and industry experts concerned about maintaining the credibility of seafood certifications in the market place.

Sigrid Lüber, president of Oceancare, a Swiss-based NGO stated, "I interpret this as a strong and clear message to the MSC that must be listened to. More than three-quarters of Swiss consumers expect that a sustainable fisheries label should explicitly rule out bycatch of threatened or endangered species such as marine mammals, sharks, sea turtles and sea birds."

“It is great to see that sustainability in seafood products is important to most consumers. Unfortunately, MSC does not live up to the consumers’ expectations. It is high time that MSC stops making empty promises,” said Ulrich Karlowski, biologist and co-founder of Deutsche Stiftung Meeresschutz/DSM (German Foundation for Marine Conservation).

Upon learning that some MSC fisheries involve such eco-unfriendly practices, 78 percent of respondents to the poll would stop buying MSC products altogether, or buy fewer products. “These results should set alarm bells ringing for the Marine Stewardship Council,” said Susan Millward, marine animal program director for Animal Welfare Institute. “Without swift and comprehensive improvement in its standards, the MSC stands to lose significant public confidence in key European markets.”

Friederike Kremer-Obrock chair of SHARKPROJECT e.V. Germany agreed, adding “this clearly shows that about 80 percent of all consumers indeed expect the MSC label to live up to its own high aspirations of sustainability, the protection of threatened marine life and vulnerable habitats. If critical improvements are not implemented swiftly, the MSC is at severe risk to irreversibly lose its credibility with consumers, thereby putting its own future and the future of our oceans at stake.”

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