

27 February 2019

Dear Dr Kiene, Chair of Board of Trustees,

Dear Mr Howes, Chief Executive

We are writing as a group of stakeholders from the On the Hook and Make Stewardship Count campaigns further to the recommendation by the UK Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee (EAC), published in its report on 17th January that:

"To ensure continued consumer confidence in the Marine Stewardship Council certification, we recommend the MSC addresses specific criticisms raised by WWF, Prof Callum Roberts and others into its five-year review and strengthens its standard accordingly. These criticisms include its unit of assessment, the need to factor in carbon from ships into its standard, concerns about shark finning (where we look forward to the publication of data verifying the reduction of this practice in 2019) and barriers to entry for small scale fisheries. The review should be transparent and ideally independently evaluated."

In the statement that the MSC published in response to this recommendation dated 17 January 2019, it was noted that *"the concerns of Prof Roberts and others should be addressed through the established process of the five-yearly Fisheries Standard Review. This is a transparent review process that invites stakeholder engagement. The process is reviewed by independent bodies, GSSI and ISEAL in order to ensure that it complies with best practices for standard setters."*

The EAC recommended that the MSC should strengthen its Standard to address specific criticisms raised during the inquiry, and that this process should be transparent and independently evaluated, to ensure "continued consumer confidence". We concur with that view in particular that the strengthened standard should be *independently* reviewed.

The EAC report is not the first time that critical improvements to the current Standard have been requested. In January 2018, the Make Stewardship Count coalition, comprising more than 80 NGOs and experts, raised serious concerns about the Standard's ability to deliver on its vision in an open letter, and called for "critical improvements to the Principle 2 of the MSC Certification Standard and the Process of Certification to be implemented by the end of 2018 at the latest" to "properly protect habitats and marine species not considered as target species". WWF Germany endorsed this call for improvements and WWF International published similar requests in March 2018.

However, the MSC's statement seems to indicate that the MSC already regards its current review process (the Fisheries Standard Review) as transparent and independently evaluated and therefore compliant with the EAC's recommendations. If that is so, we wish to publicly record that we do not believe this to be the case.

It would appear from the statement that MSC is of the view that an independent review of its Standard is satisfied by reference to compliance with ISEAL and GSSI which in turn ensures consumer confidence.

If that is so, we have a number of concerns that we wish to raise:

- One of ISEAL's board members (as detailed on its website), Nicolas Guichoux, is also the MSC's Chief Program Officer.
- Rather than acting as a review of the MSC's Standard, GSSI and ISEAL create over-arching frameworks setting out globally applicable *minimum* criteria under which specific eco-certification and labelling initiatives can develop. ISEAL is not specific to fisheries, but to all certification schemes. Meanwhile, GSSI reviews whether fishery certifications are compliant with FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fisheries but not whether the fishery is sustainable. Furthermore, GSSI does not evaluate the performance of the certification scheme.
- That these bodies create over-arching frameworks rather than independently review actual performance of the MSC Standard is perhaps best emphasised by the fact that while the MSC states that it is fully compliant with them, the EAC has recommended that the standard *should be strengthened* to reflect the concerns of stakeholders including Prof Callum Roberts and WWF. Subsequent to the release of the report, MSC has now acknowledged the need to address these concerns in the FSR.
- The March 2017 GSSI benchmark report of the MSC Standard does not, amongst other things, cover the issues around unit of assessment and compartmentalisation, or shark finning, that were discussed at the EAC.

In our view, an independent review must:

- Be externally undertaken.
- Be carried out by an independent panel of experts, including stakeholders from science, NGOs, retail and the fishing industry. Within this format, the review could also incorporate open and transparent technical workshops.
- Not be limited to review topics selected by the MSC, but instead include those improvements to Principle 2 and the certification process as requested by e.g. Make Stewardship Count, On the Hook and WWF.
- Be fully transparent.
- Cover both the Standard and its application and make recommendations regarding both.
- Be conducted within a reasonable timeframe. The independent review should move faster than the Fisheries Standard Review process, such that its findings can be incorporated into that review.

We look forward to the MSC providing at your earliest convenience a clear statement explaining how you intend to operationalise the EAC's recommendations, and strongly urge you to consider the possibility of a fully independent, external review as outlined above. Such a review would surely be the most effective way of identifying and addressing the various issues of concern to wide-ranging stakeholders, thereby ensuring consumer confidence.

Yours sincerely,

Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall
Professor Callum Roberts

Richard Benyon MP
Zac Goldsmith MP
James Heapey MP
John McNally MP

BLOOM
Blue Marine Foundation
Fair-fish International Association
Fair-fish Switzerland
Fish4Ever
Island Conservation Society
World Wise Foods

Make Stewardship Count Coalition