

## Amend principles, criteria

This piece is in response to an article on the Marine Stewardship Council that appeared in *SAMUDRA Report* No. 37

To tell consumers of marine products whether their fish are coming from a sustainable fishery is, no doubt, a tall order. It would be surprising if an organization endeavoring just that would not come under criticism. Therefore, I have never been surprised by outpourings from parties disagreeing with one or the other of the judgements of the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC). However, the article reproduced from *The Guardian* in the March 2004 issue of *SAMUDRA Report* talks of some major flaws, and even hints at the need for some top management changes.

Four years ago, I was invited by MSC to attend a meeting of 'senior advisers'. After reading a lot of written material, talking to people and participating in the discussions, I wrote up some recommendations, which I submitted to MSC's board. My feeling is that they were never heeded. But I believe that some of those recommendations are still relevant, particularly in view of what we have read in the March issue of *SAMUDRA Report*. What follows is a selection of those recommendations.

MSC should give priority attention to three important and inter-related issues: (a) public image and publicity; (b) cost and financing of certification; and (c) principles and criteria. Undoubtedly, public image and publicity are key to MSC's success, for its image in the eyes of both fishermen and consumers at large will determine the demand for MSC's logo. Therefore, MSC must make up its mind on the public image it wishes to project. Only a clear decision would enable a well-focused publicity campaign. Most of the audience MSC must address—fishing people, in particular—want clear-cut answers. At this time, MSC's image still appears rather hazy.

It seems that MSC may be reflected in the public eye mainly as one, or a certain combination, of the following characterizations:

- i. an environment and fishery resources-oriented public non-profit organization, which, through eco-certification, wishes to use market motivation to promote rational fisheries;
- ii. an enviro-business whose main interest lies in selling eco-certifications by promising customers that its logo would upgrade their products' market value (while ensuring its own profitable existence);
- iii. fishery industry's and related business' answer to extravagant 'green anti-fishing' statements and campaigns.

While MSC may, in fact, comprise all three characterizations, in the public eye these are not the same. Hence, once decided on, the preferred image should be resolutely publicized, notwithstanding different individual, business and ideological approaches and motives among MSC's sponsors, participants, activists and clients. In my view, a well-modulated combination of (i) and (iii) is the one that should bring about the most favourable attitude among both MSC's immediate clients and fish-products consumers at large.

### Certification costs

In spite of the inertia of the already ongoing procedures, I am strongly advising against leaving the cost of certification and the financial arrangements involved to direct negotiations between the representatives

of the fishery to be certified and the certifying consultancy firms, particularly, but not only, in Third World countries.

**A**n honest, corruption-proof ecolabelling business must, like justice, not only be done, but also be evident. The present procedure may seem, in the eyes of many, as leaving a door open to various 'arrangements' between the negotiating parties.

My suggestion is that while the client fishery is required to bear the costs of the certification process, all financial arrangements are concluded between the certifying firm and MSC, which collects dues from clients and pays consultants. All parties should agree and make it legal that all financial relations between the certifiers and the certified would represent an offence. Leaving all financial relations to MSC would allow 'discounts' and 'soft payments' in deserving cases, especially when handling applications from small-scale fisheries in Third World countries.

In the past, MSC discussed the option of adopting an approach intrinsic to small-scale fisheries in developing countries and, hence, specifically adapted principles and criteria, but decided against it. MSC's principles and criteria have been criticized in the press and at meetings as being unsuitable for small-scale fisheries that would not be

able to meet such standards. MSC's present standards, say the critics, require the sort of management and data available only to fisheries in industrial countries, and by adopting them, MSC becomes another offshoot of 'bad' globalization, which favours the rich and the strong. For example, the Nordic ecolabelling system proposes flexibility where data and management systems are missing. Accordingly, 10 years of stable catches and effort would indicate a sustainable fishery.

There is thus a need to discuss a revision of the principles and criteria, and either amend them so they would also fit small-scale fisheries and fisheries in developing countries such as Thailand, Indonesia, India and China—all major producers—or prepare separate principles and criteria for such fisheries, and regard fishing people and their communities as a part and parcel of the system to be sustained.

#### **Aquaculture certification**

In aquaculture, MSC should promote eco-certification of farmed fish for two main reasons: First, the share of farmed fish in total food-fish production, including marine and estuarine/lagunar species, will continue increasing, and cannot be ignored. Second, many aquaculture practices have become controversial from the point of view of the protection of marine habitats and wild

stocks, and their high fishmeal requirements.

**I**n order to avoid multiplication of mechanisms and logos, such certification should be implemented within the existing MSC system. MSC's decision should not be affected by possible or hypothetical commercial competition between the fish farming and capture sectors.

Eco-certifications would honour good practices, on the one hand, and, by default, censure bad ones, on the other. Some practices, like salmon farming along north America's west coast, or shrimp farming in mangrove habitats, have become rather explosive issues. Excess pollution also arises from cage farming in inshore areas. Technological and other solutions are possible and might be expedited, should MSC achieve the desired prestige and market influence. However, for certifying farmed fish (and shellfish) specific principles and criteria would have to be drafted. These standards should cover contamination of fish raised in polluted environments or fed with contaminated fodder.

Another controversial issue is genetic modification of farmed species. In my opinion, where it isn't covered by legislation, MSC shouldn't take sides, but its relevant principles and criteria should allow, by default, eco-certification of genetically modified aquatic products, where it is legal. ♣

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Response