



Get certified!

Your guide to the MSC fishery assessment process

Contents

Front cover Image: © Goffe Struiksmma



Let's get started

The aim of this guide is to give you an overview of what to expect during each stage of the MSC assessment process, drawing on the experience of previously certified fisheries. We hope it will help to ensure that your fishery's assessment is efficient and effective, and give you the best possible chance of a positive outcome.

If you have questions at any stage, your local MSC representative will be happy to help

Together we can ensure
healthy oceans for the future.

Which fisheries can apply?

The MSC promotes equal access to its certification program for wild-capture fisheries, regardless of their size, scale, location or technology. However, a few exceptions are outlined below.

Types of fisheries that are eligible

- ✓ Single species
- ✓ Multi-species
- ✓ Trawl
- ✓ Long line
- ✓ Hand raked
- ✓ Pots
- ✓ Freshwater
- ✓ Marine
- ✓ Inshore
- ✓ Offshore
- ✓ Demersal
- ✓ Pelagic
- ✓ Enhanced

Types of fisheries that are not eligible

- ✗ Fisheries targeting amphibians, reptiles, birds and/or mammals
- ✗ Fisheries using destructive fishing practices (such as poison or explosives)
- ✗ Fisheries or companies that have been successfully prosecuted for forced labour violations within the last two years
- ✗ Fisheries conducted under a controversial unilateral exemption to an international agreement
- ✗ Purely aquaculture (although some forms of enhanced fishery are eligible for assessment)

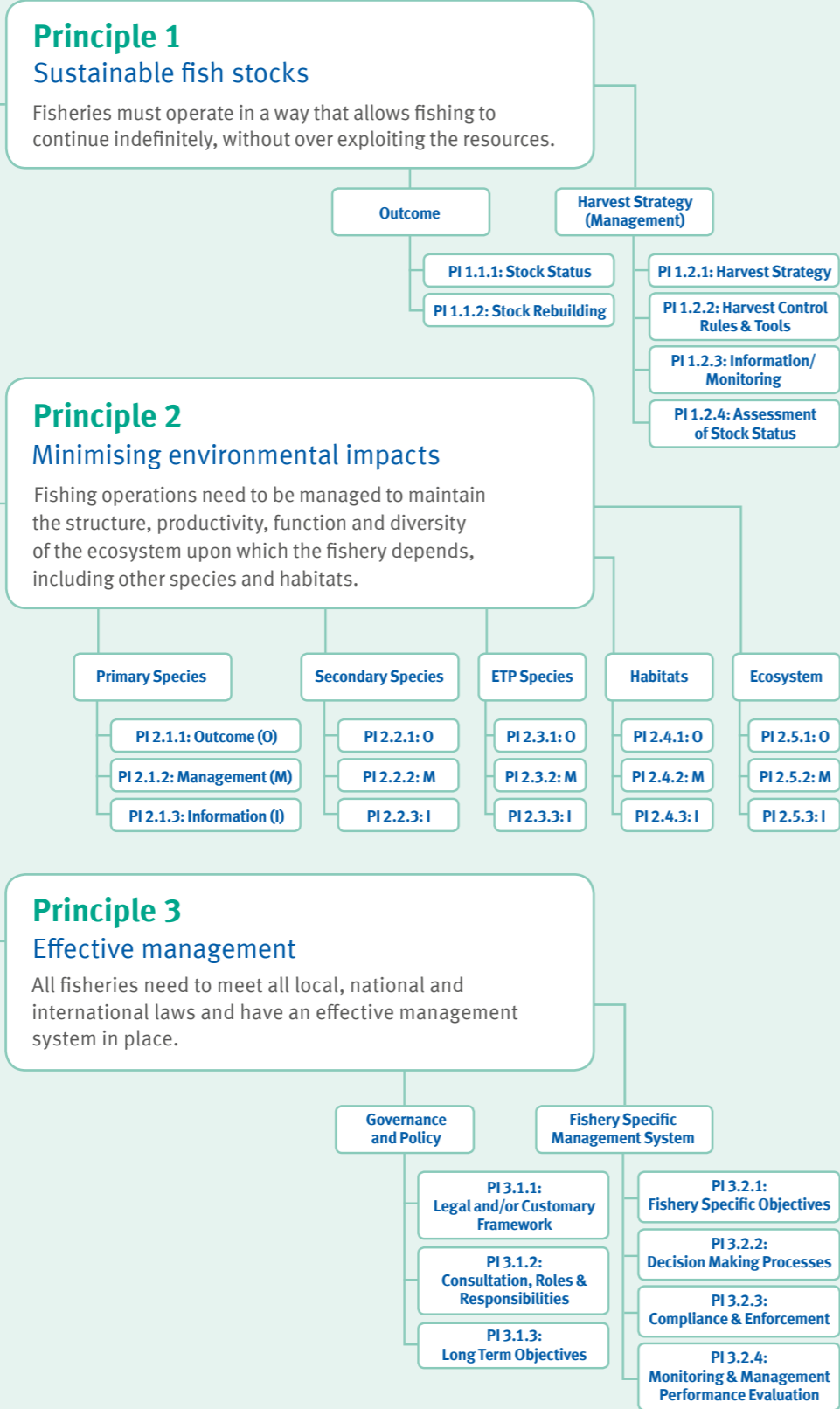


1: The MSC Fisheries Standard

The MSC Fisheries Standard brings together over 15 years of collaboration with scientists, the fishing industry and conservation groups. It reflects the most up to date understanding of internationally accepted fisheries science and best practice management.

MSC Fisheries Standard

If you decide to enter MSC assessment, an accredited third party certification body will independently score your fishery against the 28 performance indicators (PIs) that make up the MSC Fisheries Standard. The PIs sit within three core principles: sustainable fish stocks; minimising environmental impact; and effective management, as shown in the assessment tree below.

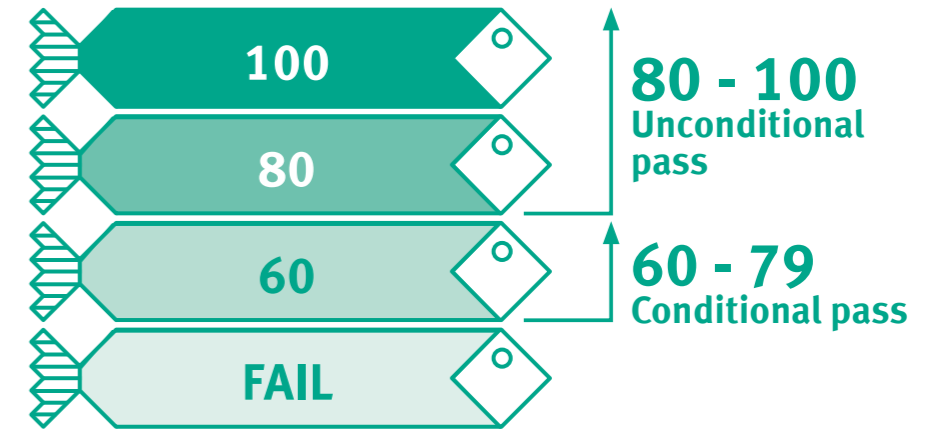


How does the scoring process work?

Your fishery will be assigned a score for each performance indicator where 60 is the minimum acceptable performance, 80 is global best practice and 100 is near perfect performance.

In order to be certified, your fishery must score:

- At least 60 for each of the 28 performance indicators
- An average score of 80 across all performance indicators under each of the three principles



If your fishery scores between 60 and 79 for any performance indicator, you will be required to take appropriate action to improve performance against the particular indicator so that it scores 80 or above within a predetermined timeframe (typically five years).



GOOD TO KNOW...

What are enhanced fisheries?

Enhanced fisheries include those wild-caught fisheries that involve some kind of human intervention other than the harvest process. The MSC has three categories of enhanced fishery:

1. Catch and grow fisheries, e.g. rope grown mussels
2. Hatch and catch fisheries, e.g. wild capture salmon where some stocking takes place
3. Habitat modified fisheries, e.g. providing casitas (artificial habitats) to attract and retain lobster

If you think your fishery may class as an enhanced fishery, your certification body will contact the MSC to check whether it falls within the scope of the MSC program.

Deciding on the Unit of Assessment

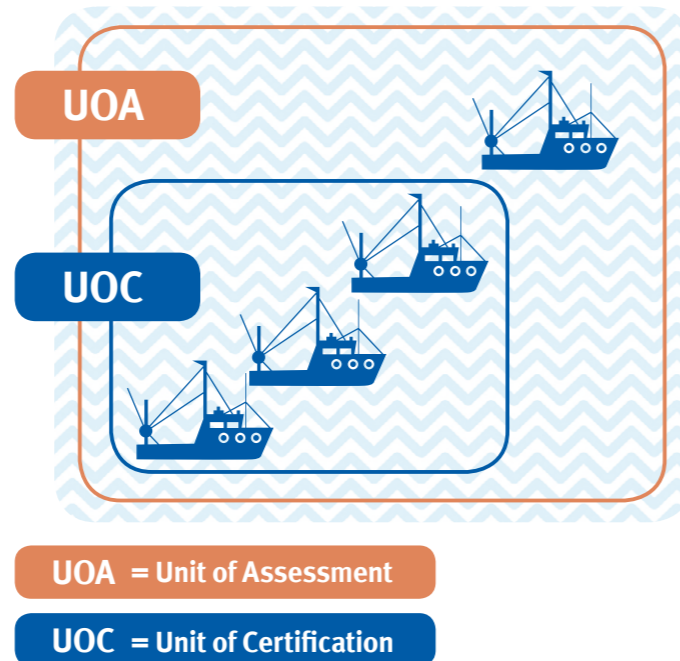
At the very beginning of the assessment process, you and your certification body will decide on the Unit of Assessment. The Unit of Assessment defines what is being assessed during the certification process and includes:

- The target stock(s);
- The fishing method or gear;
- The fleets, vessels, individual fishing operators and other eligible fishers pursuing that stock.

The Unit of Assessment could cover anything from a handful of local boats to a full national fleet. Once it has been defined, only seafood from that particular unit will later be able to carry the MSC ecolabel in the marketplace.

Other eligible fishers might not be initially included in the Unit of Certification, but may join later. This is done through the process of certificate sharing, since they were included in the assessment of the fishery or fishery's impacts.

Defining the Unit of Assessment



MSC Chain of Custody certification and fishery traceability

The MSC Chain of Custody Standard gives assurance that products bearing the MSC ecolabel come from a certified sustainable source. Certification of the supply chain is necessary for seafood from your fishery to be sold as “MSC certified” on packs or menus. We suggest you contact relevant customers early in the fishery certification process to recommend that they become certified against the MSC Chain of Custody Standard.

Your certification body may determine that vessels or other entities involved in getting your seafood to market require their own Chain of Custody certificate. This might be the case where traceability between harvest and first sale is insufficient, or where complex harvesting takes place (for example, using both certified and non-certified gear types). Your certification body will ask your fishery to demonstrate traceability from harvest to first sale before issuing the first draft report. However, it's worth starting to think about the identification, segregation and traceability systems and procedures your fishery has in place early on in the assessment process. In this way, you can make adjustments as necessary.

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Preparing the information

A fishery assessment is based on expert analysis of information. This information can take many forms, including:

- Data on fish stocks
- Data on landings
- Interviews with stakeholders
- Scientific papers and reports

Without this information the assessment team will not be able to make a thorough evaluation of your fishery.

What about fisheries with limited data?

Your fishery may not have access to the detailed scientific data that is typically evaluated in an MSC assessment. This is particularly true for small scale and developing world fisheries. If data are limited, the assessment team can use the MSC's Risk-Based Framework, which is built into the MSC Fisheries Certification Requirements.

The Risk-Based Framework enables the assessment team to use a structured risk assessment to determine if a data-limited fishery is operating sustainably and ensures the MSC program and its associated benefits are accessible to all fisheries.

Gaining the support of stakeholders

We recommended that you contact relevant stakeholders at the very beginning of the assessment process to build trust, reduce the likelihood of any unforeseen setbacks and help your assessment go smoothly. The MSC welcomes the input and involvement of stakeholders throughout the assessment process to ensure that assessments are fair, credible and robust.

Costs and sources of funding

Certification is paid for by the fishery client. The MSC does not receive payment, only the certification body you have chosen. Anecdotal information from certified fisheries suggests the cost can vary from USD \$15,000 - \$120,000, however the cost will depend on:

- The complexity of your fishery
- The availability of information
- The level of stakeholder involvement

There are a range of funding sources and opportunities to assist fishery certification. Your regional MSC office will be able to provide you with up to date advice on relevant funding options in your region.

Find out more:

A checklist of information that may be required during your assessment is available at

- For more about the Risk-Based Framework see
- For more information on how stakeholders can get involved in the assessment process, see
- For more on the MSC Chain of Custody Standard, see

3: The optional pre-assessment

A pre-assessment is an optional preliminary review to inform whether your fishery is ready to enter full assessment.

Pre-assessments are much quicker and cheaper than full assessments, however they do not have the rigour and robustness of a full assessment.

We recommend that pre-assessments are carried out by an accredited independent certification body. During a pre-assessment, the assessor will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the fishery in relation to the MSC's 28 performance indicators and allocate an approximate score for each PI. Their results will be used to determine the likelihood of your fishery meeting the MSC Fisheries Standard.

At the end of the pre-assessment, the certification body will present you with a pre-assessment report which identifies any obstacles that need to be addressed before your fishery enters full assessment. The pre-assessment report remains confidential between you and the certification body. It is your own decision whether to proceed to full assessment.

The pre-assessment will consist of:

- A meeting between you (the fishery client) and the certification body
- A site visit (this is optional during the pre-assessment stage)
- A review of available data
- Identification of any stakeholder issues or interests
- A pre-assessment report outlining the extent to which your fishery meets the MSC Standard
- A description of potential obstacles that will need to be addressed before your fishery meets the requirements of the MSC Standard

GOOD TO KNOW...

A pre-assessment is a good chance to judge whether a particular certification body is right for you. You are under no obligation to use the same certification body for pre-assessment, assessment and post certification surveillance and auditing. However, there may be time and cost savings associated with doing so.

Fishery Improvement Projects (FIPs)

An increasing number of fisheries are making the necessary changes to become sustainable with the hope of achieving certification. This has led to considerable growth in organised efforts to improve fisheries, often called 'Fishery Improvement Projects' (FIPs).

If the results of the pre-assessment indicate that your fishery is not meeting the MSC Standard, tools and technical assistance are available to help your fishery make the improvements required to meet the standard.

Once the areas needing improvement have been identified in your pre-assessment report, the next stage is to develop an action plan for improvement. We have developed an Action Plan for Improvement Template which can be used to lay out and report what needs to be done, by who and when.

Successful FIPs rely on the support of stakeholders, including retailers, governments, NGOs and funders. The MSC Benchmarking and Tracking Tool (BMT) can be used to track the progress being made by fisheries as they improve towards sustainability, and help stakeholders understand the status of the FIPs that they are engaging with.

Find out more:

For more information on FIPs, to download these tools, or to find a consultant see

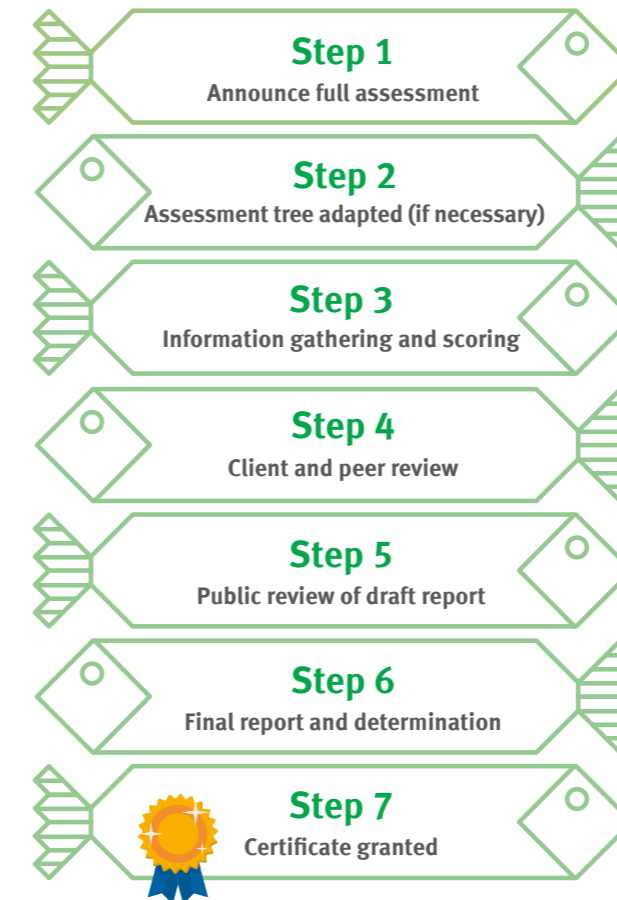


4: Full assessment

Full assessment is the detailed, public, rigorous process that your certification body will follow to determine whether or not your fishery meets the MSC Fisheries Standard.

The process starts when you, the fishery client, sign a contract with your certification body and they notify the MSC that your fishery is entering full assessment.

Overview of the full assessment process



1

Announce full assessment

- The certification body announces to stakeholders that the fishery is undergoing full assessment.
- The announcement includes the target species, gear type, and fishing area: the Unit(s) of Assessment (UoA). It also includes who the assessment team will be.
- The MSC is alerted, sends the announcement email to relevant stakeholders, updates the website and issues a press release in collaboration with you. You may wish to identify key spokespeople, and include some high resolution photographs of the fishery in the press release in preparation for media interest.

GOOD TO KNOW...

The average time taken for a full assessment is 12 months and the minimum is 8 months. The length depends to some extent on your preparation as well as the nature and complexity of your fishery.

2

Assessment tree adapted (if necessary)

In the majority of cases, the assessment team will simply confirm that they plan to use the default assessment tree to evaluate your fishery. The default tree was designed to be suitable for most fisheries, making the scoring process more consistent, transparent and efficient. However, we recognise that some fisheries (for example, enhanced fisheries or mixed species fisheries) have unique characteristics. These fisheries may require revisions to be made to the assessment tree.

- The assessment team will determine whether your fishery meets the requirements of the default assessment tree. If a non-default tree is used, a 30 day consultation period begins during which stakeholders can comment on the revisions to the assessment tree.
- The assessment tree is central to the fishery certification process. It is important to familiarise yourself with the tree and discuss any queries with your certification body.

3

Information gathering and scoring

- The assessment team analyse all relevant information (including technical papers, reports and data about your fishery).
- They will then arrange a ‘site visit’ to interview you, the fishery managers and the stakeholders to ensure they are aware of all potential information and issues. The assessment team use this evidence to score the fishery’s performance against the assessment tree.

GOOD TO KNOW...

You can help the assessment team by organising information in accordance with the structure of the assessment tree.



4

Client and peer review

The certification body compiles a draft report summarising:

- Your fishery’s performance against the MSC Standard
- Your fishery’s average score across each of the three core principles
- Proposed certification outcome
- Details of any conditions aimed at improving your fishery’s performance

Your certification body will give you time to comment on the preliminary draft report. Next, your certification body will arrange for independent experts known as ‘peer reviewers’ (typically fisheries scientists) to review the revised draft report. Third party scientists approve the selection of peer reviewers to ensure they give an independent review of the certifier’s report.

GOOD TO KNOW...

It is important that you feel confident that the draft report provides a true and robust audit of your fishery and that you have a good understanding of the reasons for any conditions given.

5

Public review of draft report

- Once you and the independent peer reviewers have a completed review of the draft report, the certification body will issue the ‘Public Comment Draft Report’ to the MSC.
- The MSC then circulates the report to stakeholders and publishes it on
- Stakeholders and members of the public have 30 days to comment on the draft report.
- This report includes a draft determination of whether or not your fishery is recommended for certification.

We advise that you review the report and make sure you are comfortable with any changes that have been made since the first draft. If you contacted stakeholders at the beginning of the process, you should have some idea of whether they are likely to object to the findings.

If your fishery has not been recommended for certification, the assessment process should have contributed to a better understanding of your fishery, and the environment in which it operates. Once you have addressed the issues that prevented your fishery from becoming certified, you are of course welcome to re-apply for assessment at any time.

Find out more:

The key players involved in a fishery assessment and their roles and responsibilities,



Final report and determination

This last report includes the team's final determination of whether or not the fishery should be certified. It is issued once the assessment team has considered the comments received during the public consultation period and revised the report accordingly.

The objections procedure

If an objection is raised during the 15 working day period of 'intent to object' after the final report is published, the fishery proceeds into the MSC's objections procedure. This provides a mechanism for any disagreement with the assessment of the fishery to be resolved by an independent adjudicator. Following appropriate consultations the adjudicator will make a decision on whether the objection should be upheld.



Public certification report and getting your certificate

If no objections have been raised, your fishery is successfully certified. Certification lasts for a maximum of five years (subject to surveillance audits). Your certification body will issue and publish a Public Certification Report, outlining any action plan requirements. Later, the certification body will issue a fishery certificate.

If your clients become certified against the MSC Chain of Custody Standard, products from your MSC certified fishery can bear the MSC ecolabel on packs or menus.



It's now time to celebrate and promote your MSC Certification!

Find out more:

- For the objections procedure please visit:

- For more on the MSC Chain of Custody Standard, see



Notes

A series of horizontal lines for taking notes, partially overlapping the background image.

5: Maintaining MSC certification

MSC certification lasts up to five years. During this time your fishery may need to make required improvements and will receive regular surveillance audits.



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Surveillance audits

Your certification body will review your fishery's progress, and the status of any improvements being made, during annual surveillance audits. Surveillance audits may involve an onsite audit, an offsite audit, or a review of information, and may be undertaken up to six months earlier/later than the anniversary date of your certificate. It is important to note that the assessment team is permitted to conduct an unannounced audit, or more frequent audits, if they identify a need to. Stakeholders are invited to provide information to the assessment team and an annual surveillance report is produced.

Re-assessment

Re-assessment should commence by the fourth anniversary of an existing certificate, so that the new certificate can continue from the five year expiry of the existing certificate.

There are two types of re-assessment:

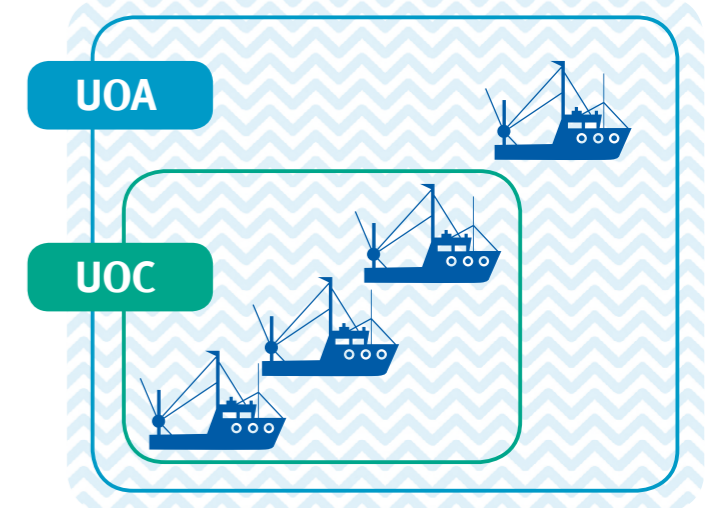
- Full re-assessment - requires that all steps and activities involved in initial full assessment are carried out
- Reduced re-assessment - if there are no outstanding conditions by the end of the third audit, all valid stakeholder issues have been addressed and the fishery entering re-assessment was covered under the previous certificate

Certificate sharing

The Unit of Assessment within your assessment included the target stock, fishing method, and any fleets, groups of vessels, individual fishing operators and 'other eligible fishers' that are involved in an MSC fishery assessment. If there are 'other eligible fishers', MSC requires that you allow others to share your certificate, and publish a statement of your understanding and willingness for reasonable certificate sharing arrangements.

Date of certification: /...../.....
Surveillance audit 1:..... /...../.....
Surveillance audit 2:..... /...../.....
Surveillance audit 3:..... /...../.....
Surveillance audit 4:..... /...../.....
Re-assessment date:..... /...../.....

Defining the Unit of Assessment



UOA = Unit of Assessment

UOC = Unit of Certification

Action plans for improvement

If your fishery scores between 60 and 79 for any performance indicators, you will be required to make improvements to ensure that your fishery scores 80 for the relevant performance indicator within a specified timeframe.

It is important to discuss the required improvements with your assessment team and develop an action plan outlining:

- The conditions that have been set for your fishery
- How they will be addressed
- Who will address them
- When they will be addressed
- How the action is expected to improve the performance of the Unit of Assessment
- How the assessment team consider whether they've been completed

6: Who's who

Key players, roles and responsibilities

Throughout the assessment process, you will become familiar with a number of key individuals and organisations. Descriptions of who they are, and their specific role(s) in the assessment process are outlined below.



The Fishery Client:

an individual(s), organisation, or group of organisations that make a formal application for a fishery to be assessed. Previous fishery clients have included government agencies, fishing industry associations, fisheries cooperatives, local management authorities and collaborations between fishing industry associations, conservation and community groups (co-clients).

Fishery clients are responsible for:

- Entering into a legal contract with an accredited certification body (therefore, they must be a legally constituted body)
- Funding the cost of certification
- Ensuring the certification body is aware of stakeholders that should be contacted to be involved in the assessment
- Ensuring that the assessment team has unrestricted access to data and information about the fishery
- Implementing any conditions placed on the fishery if / when the MSC certificate is issued



The Certification Body (or Conformity Assessment Body):

an independent body approved by ASI to conduct MSC assessments and make a final determination of whether the fishery meets the MSC Standard based on the results.

The certification body is responsible for:

- Establishing the fishery assessment team
- Issuing the fishery certificate
- Conducting surveillance audits and evaluations during the life of the fishery certificate



The Assessment Team:

fisheries scientists with specialist knowledge who have been selected by the certification body to conduct the assessment.

The assessment team are responsible for:

- Assessing fisheries against the MSC Fisheries Standard and in accordance with the MSC Fisheries Certification Requirements on behalf of the certification body
- Using information provided by the fishery, management agencies and stakeholder groups to reach a judgment about the performance of a fishery
- Using existing information and reports to make a precautionary decision (they are not obliged to conduct new research in order to reach a judgment)



Peer Reviewers:

independent experts (typically two fisheries scientists) selected to review the assessment report and give their opinion on the conclusions reached; the conditions raised; the client action plan; and each performance indicator's score and provided rationale.



Stakeholders:

any individuals or organisations that are interested in, or affected by, the fishery assessment.

Stakeholders are responsible for:

- Bringing any issues and concerns they have regarding the conduct or performance of the fishery relevant to the MSC Fisheries Standard to the attention of the assessment team
- Providing well informed and substantive arguments for their positions, including references to objective evidence that can assist the assessment team

Typical stakeholders include:

- Government agencies
- Environmental / conservation organisations
- Other fishers / fishing sectors (e.g. recreational and subsistence fishers)
- Industry groups
- Community groups
- Commercial / post-harvest sector (your customers)
- Scientists

7: Summary checklist

Here's a handy checklist to help you track your progress through the MSC assessment process.

Familiarise yourself with the MSC Fisheries Standard

- Familiarise yourself with MSC's performance indicators and assessment tree
- Download the Fisheries Certification Requirements to see the full details of the MSC Fisheries Standard at

Prepare for the assessment

- Choose a certification body – see
- Decide on the Unit of Assessment
- Define the contract with the certification body
- Prepare the information – for full details of the information required see
- Get in touch with stakeholders interested in your fishery
- Investigate sources of funding
- Think about Chain of Custody certification

Pre-assessment

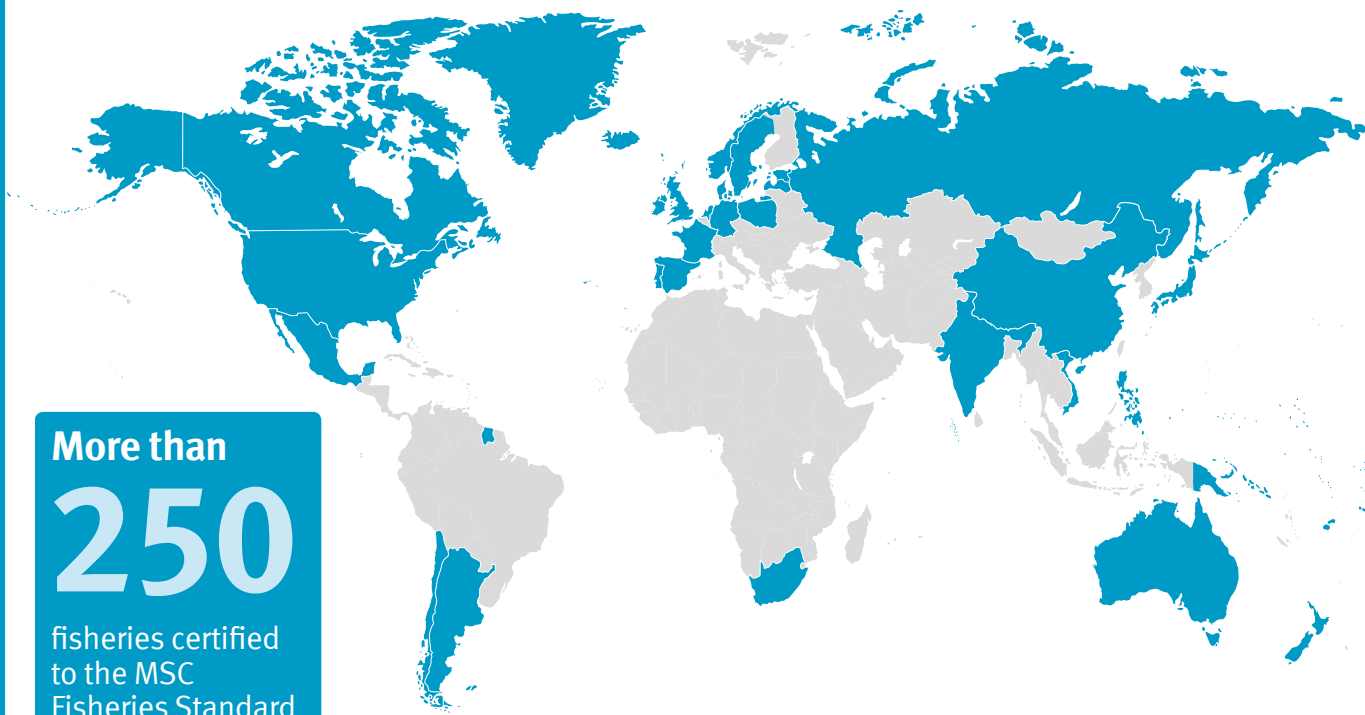
- Arrange a pre-assessment to inform whether your fishery is ready to enter full assessment.
- If your fishery is not advised to continue to full assessment, find out more about FIPs as well as the tools and consultants who are available to help you reach the MSC Standard

Arrange the full assessment

- Announce full assessment
- Prepare the information required by your certification body – for full details of the information required see
- Arrange a site visit with your certification body
- Review the certification body's draft report
- Familiarise yourself with the objections procedure
- Celebrate and promote your fishery's MSC Certification!

Notes

Countries where fisheries are engaged in the MSC program



More than
250
fisheries certified
to the MSC
Fisheries Standard

Find out more:

info@msc.org



@MSCecolabel #MSCcertified



/marine-stewardship-council



/sustainableseafood

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