

Marine Stewardship Council
Guidance to potential or actual clients:
The MSC Fishery Assessment &
Certification Process

Acknowledgements

Former MSC staffer Alexia Wellbelove and current Regional Director Asia Pacific, Duncan Leadbitter originally drafted this guidance document. MSC regional and HQ staff, representatives of certification bodies, existing fishery clients and other stakeholders and members of the MSC's Technical Advisory Board and Stakeholder Council have provided valuable feedback to improve its contents.

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1. Introduction

The purpose of this document is to provide information and advice about the MSC fishery assessment and certification process to fisheries organisations or agencies considering certifying their fishery.

This main guide introduces you to the general issues of importance when considering assessment of your fishery under the MSC programme.

There are separate information sheets if you would like more detailed advice.

- Information Sheet 1 – How to choose a certification body
- Information Sheet 2 – Who is a client?
- Information Sheet 3 – Unit of certification explained
- Information Sheet 4 – Costs explained
- Information Sheet 5 – Roles and responsibilities

2. What is fishery certification?

Fishery certification is a voluntary process that involves an assessment of a fishery to determine whether it meets or passes a given standard. If successful, products from the fishery are usually entitled to use an eco-label in the marketplace after a traceability audit (chain of custody certification) has been completed.

3. What is the MSC?

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is an independent, global, non-profit organisation whose role is to recognise, via a certification programme, well-managed and sustainable fisheries and to harness consumer preference for seafood products bearing the MSC label of approval, or eco-label.

At the centre of the MSC is a set of *Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing* which is used as a standard in a third party, independent and voluntary certification programme. The MSC standard consists of three principles. Each principle is elaborated by a number of criteria. The three principles consider the:

1. Status of the target fish stock.
2. Impact of the fishery on the ecosystem.
3. Performance and effectiveness of the fishery management system.

The MSC promotes equal access to its certification programme for all fisheries regardless of their size, scale, ecology, geography or technology. Its programme provides a market-based mechanism for people interested in responsible management of seafood resources, sustainability of global fish stocks and the health of the marine and freshwater ecosystems. The MSC is supported by a broad coalition of those with a stake in the future of global seafood supplies.

The MSC does not certify fisheries!

The MSC programme uses independent standard setting and accreditation functions. This means that the MSC establishes the standard by which fishery performance is measured and independently accredits third party certification bodies that conduct the actual fishery assessments and make certification decisions consistent with the MSC standard.

The MSC monitors certification bodies closely to make sure they are competent to undertake assessments and comply with MSC rules. The MSC regularly visits each certification body's offices and attends site visits while certification bodies are performing fishery assessments.

The accredited certification body follows the rules set out in the MSC's Fisheries Certification Methodology when performing an independent assessment of fisheries against the MSC standard.

If the standard is met, a fishery certificate is issued by the certification body not the MSC. The independent certification body also conducts all follow up performance audits and evaluations during the life of the fishery certificate.

4. Why get certified?

Fisheries organisations or agencies want go through the MSC fishery assessment process for different reasons. Most fishers would probably like a better price for their product (one of the expected outcomes of eco-labelling), but the MSC has learned from previous certification clients that they also have other reasons for seeking certification. For example:

- Access to new markets – there are expanding markets for eco-labelled products in a variety of countries.
- Maintain a competitive position in existing markets that increasingly favour consumer choice of products from sustainable fisheries.
- Stable markets – demand for eco-labelled products in some countries in continental Europe outstrips current supply.
- Demonstrating good resource stewardship to the community and stakeholders.
- Pursuing transition to self management.

As the client, you should be very clear about what you want to achieve from the certification process.

5. Scope of the MSC standard

The MSC fishery assessment process can be used to certify wild capture freshwater and marine species. The scope of the MSC programme does not currently extend to aquaculture operations.

The MSC recognises that many fisheries might involve other kinds of human intervention than the capture process. The MSC calls such fisheries *enhanced fisheries*. The certification

body must clarify with the MSC whether fisheries like these fall within the scope of the MSC programme at the pre-assessment stage.

In fisheries where the catch is landed 'live' for subsequent grow-out for quality enhancement or sale, the scope of the MSC assessment and certification usually applies to the point of first landing from the wild.

Does the MSC assess recovering or depleted species?

Any species described as depleted (or similarly) may undergo an MSC fishery assessment, but the fishery must be conducted in a manner that clearly leads to recovery over a specified timeframe and a precautionary approach must be taken into account when making fishery management decisions.

6. What is involved in fishery certification?

Certification to the MSC standard is a multi-step process, which is carried out by an independent organisation approved by the MSC called the certification body. The formal document that guides this process is called the MSC Fisheries Certification Methodology. You can get this document by contacting the MSC (email: fisheries@msc.org or see page 14 to contact your local office by telephone).

The methodology used by the independent certification bodies includes procedures designed to transparently identify and address issues about target stock(s), the impact of fishing on the marine environment and the effectiveness of the fishery's management system.

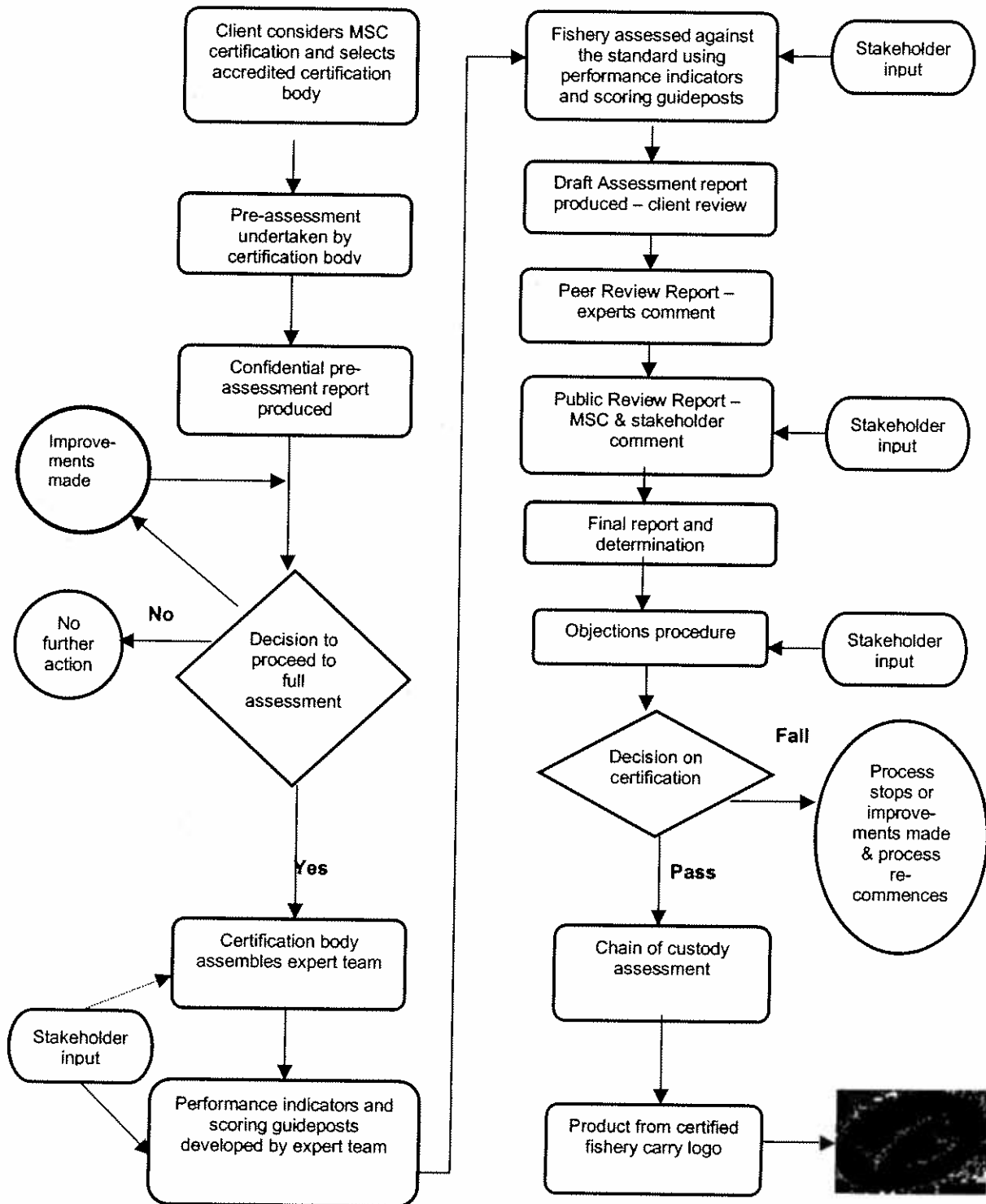
Among other things these procedures include:

- Formal stakeholder consultation.
- Detailed public reporting of information and operational performance measures used in the assessment.
- Standardised multi-criteria methods for combining the operational performance measures into an overall score for the fishery.
- Identification of conditions to improve weaker performance.
- Peer review of the assessment.
- A formal objections procedure.

Figure 1 on the facing page outlines key steps involved in assessment and certification.

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FIGURE 1 – Assessment process flow chart



7. Getting ready for certification

One of the first steps is to choose the certification body you would like to conduct the assessment of your fishery.

If you have not already chosen a certification body and would like further information on this topic, see '**Information sheet 1 – How to choose a certification body**'. This sets out important information about getting quotes and value for money, what to look for in a contract and factors that might influence your decision.

Who should be the client?

Fishery clients have included government agencies, fishing industry associations, local management authorities and co-clients involving fishing industry associations and NGOs, or different government agencies working together to achieve certification.

Industry organisations:

- Western Australian Fishing Industry Council, (Western Australian Rock Lobster Fishery)
- Hoki Fishery Management Company, New Zealand (Hoki Fishery)
- At-Sea Processors Association, USA (Bering Sea & Aleutian Islands and Gulf of Alaska Pollock Fisheries)

Management agencies:

- Colchester Borough Council, United Kingdom (Thames Herring Fishery)
- Alaska Department of Fish and Game, USA (Alaska Salmon Fishery)
- Government of South Georgia and South Sandwich Islands, UK (South Georgia Patagonian Toothfish Longline Fishery)

A certificate is a formal document that confers both rights and responsibilities on the certificate holder. One of the most significant issues to consider is whether the holder of the certificate is able to implement (either directly or indirectly) conditions which may be placed on the fishery client as part of the certification. Failure to implement conditions can lead to suspension or withdrawal of the certificate and as the client, you must therefore be confident that you can successfully implement needed actions.

Certification might also have implications for fishery management and/or research agencies and it is important to have a clear understanding of the potential financial and work consequences that may arise from a successful fishery assessment. This may not be an issue if the client is the agency itself, however, if the client is a fishing industry or other organisation it is important to ensure that the management agency or research organisations are involved in the certification process from the earliest possible point.

If you are interested in further information on this topic see '**Information sheet 2 – Who is a client?**'

What should actually be certified? (What is the 'unit of certification'?)

Only the fishery, fish stock or particular gears / fishing methods you identify to the certification body at the beginning of the assessment process can be certified and therefore able to carry the MSC eco-label in the marketplace. This cannot be changed partway through the assessment process without substantial delay. Among other things, this means you cannot add species (such as bycatch / by-product species) to a certificate at the end of a successful assessment process.

If you have questions concerning how the MSC defines a fishery for certification purposes, or are interested in further information on this topic, see '***Information sheet 3 – Unit of certification explained***'.

8. What should I do to ensure a smooth assessment process?

Before entering into formal arrangements or contracts with a certification body, an interested client can do a great deal to make the process run smoothly.

We have observed that certain things have worked well for previous certification clients. Here are some suggestions:

Set up a contact point within your organisation

Designate an individual or group of individuals to assist and monitor the certification and to be a point of contact for the certification body's assessment team. The assessment process and the management of activities after a certificate is awarded require attention to both detail and time frames. Someone in your organisation should be assigned responsibility for ensuring you meet your obligations as the client, such as delivering any required information or actions on time.

At the risk of suggesting that yet another committee be established, there might be value in having a small group of people tasked with ensuring that both the assessment process and post certification requirements are managed in a timely and efficient fashion. This might include representatives from industry (fishermen and processors), the fishery management and/or research agencies and/or relevant stakeholders. Alternatively, it might just involve a project management group from within your organisation.

Have a clear statement of purpose – ensure that your expectations are realistic

It is important that as many people as possible within the client organisation or group share an understanding of what is being sought from the certification process so that the evaluation of benefits versus costs can be conducted from a realistic basis.

You should probably also consider how maximum benefit can be extracted from a successful certification.

Have a clear understanding of likely time frames

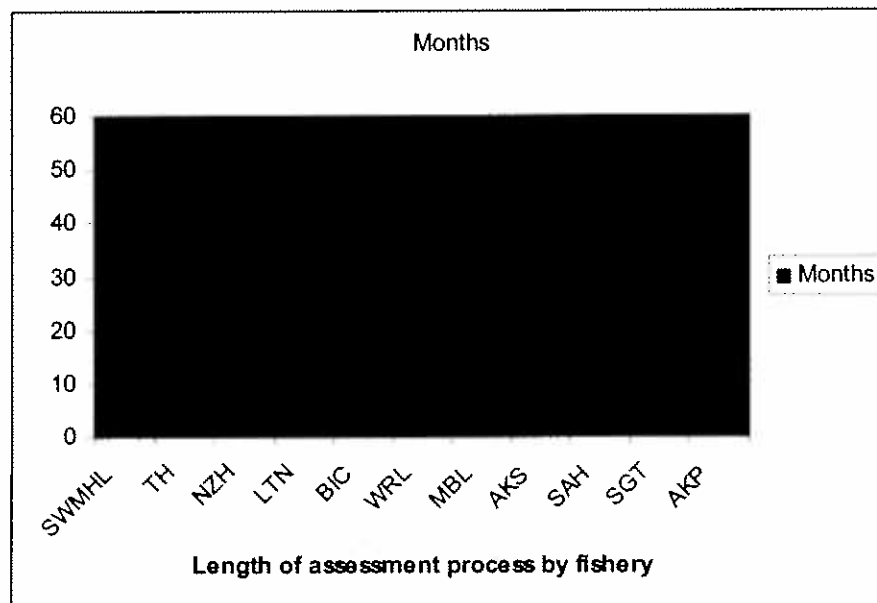
The process of certification is comprehensive and scientifically rigorous and thus takes time. The Fisheries Certification Methodology sets out the MSC's mandatory requirements including the minimum length of time required for consultation with stakeholders at certain stages of the process.

The length of the process depends to some extent on your own time frames, as well as the nature and complexity of the fishery. The degree of commitment and willingness to engage by those who hold important information or data on the fishery is a crucial factor that influences the length of the process. Finally, the resources available to the certification body as well as the level of other work commitments of their assessment team members can significantly influence how long the certification process takes. Raise the issue of timeframes directly with prospective certification bodies. Previous clients recommend you ask lots of questions of prospective certification bodies about their experiences with the duration of assessment projects.

The MSC has observed that the main stages of the certification process can take:

- Pre-assessment – one month to nine months. Generally at the lower end of the scale.
- Full Assessment – in the absence of an objection full assessments are estimated to take between 5 and 24 months depending upon the complexity of the fishery. Two fisheries have been subjected to formal objections before certification – both were very controversial fisheries for some stakeholders. One fishery assessment process took 34 months from the beginning to successful resolution of the objection, the other took 48 months. These are not representative of most fishery assessments and not indicative of the time taken to resolve an objection. For detailed information about the factors influencing the length of time for a given assessment, you could contact the MSC, the fishery client contact or the relevant certification body.

The following chart shows the length of time taken for each certification process by certified fishery (to September 2005). You can see that most processes have taken less than 20 months with a cluster of fisheries taking around 12-14 months.



Ensure the support of interested parties from the outset

The support of all those involved in the fishery including industry (fishermen and processors), management agencies (scientific and regulatory) and stakeholder organisations (e.g. environmental or community-based groups) is vital. Their support will help ensure the certification process runs smoothly, may help minimise delays and potentially avoid objections to a certification result.

The MSC programme depends upon the input and involvement of all relevant stakeholder groups. A significant amount of time is devoted to ensure inclusiveness and transparency in the fishery assessment process. Our observations to date indicate that it is vitally important that the client organisation invest time in gaining the support of stakeholders and agencies (or fishing industry if the agency is the client).

The MSC has developed guidance for certification bodies about how to conduct stakeholder consultations in the MSC fishery assessment process and the MSC's expectations about this process. It is very important that the client provide the certification body with as much information as possible on relevant stakeholder groups, thus minimising costs to your organisation and cutting down on time – why pay a certification body to find out information that you already have and could provide to them?

We suggest the following stakeholder groups with whom it is worth discussing the proposed certification:

- *Government agency staff (if not the client organisation)* – fishery and conservation managers and government scientists have an obvious interest in actions taken in the fishery by the fishing industry. Government agencies commonly hold much of the information required by the certification body.

Certification involves an assessment of the outcomes and effectiveness of fishery management activity and staff need to be assured that such an assessment can be a constructive exercise. With most fisheries managed according to laws enacted or administered by the government, the support and cooperation of relevant management agency staff and decision-makers is critical if the certificate is to be retained, especially if changes to improve the management of the fishery require co-operative actions between government and industry.

A successful certification is as much a reflection of their efforts as it is of others.

- *Environmental / conservation organisations* – these groups need to have a thorough understanding of the MSC process. Particularly the concept of continuous improvement as a mechanism to enable fisheries to make positive changes from an environmental perspective whilst enjoying the benefits of logo use. Sometimes these groups may have been lobbying or campaigning for change and relationships with the industry can be challenging or broken. It is far better to involve stakeholders from the conservation community from the beginning than risk alienating them in the process which could lead to challenges and delays later on during the assessment.
- *Industry groups* – while there are obvious competitive advantages associated with certification, there are also advantages (especially in the post harvest chain) to having as many groups as possible from the fishery under assessment join the certification project. These advantages can include spreading the cost and potentially securing markets.
- *Other fishing sectors* – the fish stock may be harvested by recreational, indigenous or subsistence fishers. Ensuring representatives of these groups have a good

understanding of the process and that the fishery as a whole should benefit from any management improvements will help win their support.

- *Commercial / post harvest sector* – the use of the logo imposes some requirements on the post harvest sector of the industry in relation to establishing a verifiable chain of custody from the certified fishery. Chain of custody certification is required for each company that takes ownership of the product that will bear the label.

Other issues

- **Cost** - The cost of certification is an issue of concern to many. If you are interested in further information on this topic, see '**Information sheet 4 – Costs explained**'.
- **Roles and Responsibilities** – The MSC assessment process is a thorough, scientific assessment and it therefore places a number of requirements on different parties throughout the assessment. If you would like an explanation of the roles, and whose responsibility they are, see '**Information Sheet 5 – Roles and Responsibilities explained**'.

9. The first stage – pre-assessment

The pre-assessment is the first formal step performed by the certification body in the certification process. The fishery client first retains the services of an MSC accredited certification body to provide a brief evaluation of the likelihood of the fishery meeting the MSC standard: the *MSC's Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing*. The certification body will identify the strengths and weaknesses of the fishery and recommend to you as the client whether or not the fishery should progress to the full assessment stage. The actual conduct of a pre-assessment and its outcomes are confidential unless you choose to make them public.

The pre-assessment will result a report by the independent certification body. At a minimum a pre-assessment must consist of:

- A substantive meeting between the client and certification body.
- Decisions with respect to potential field visits.
- A preliminary assessment of the extent to which the fishery is consistent with the *MSC's Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing*.
- An evaluation of the clients' state of preparedness for assessment of their fishery.
- A review of the availability of required data and information.
- Identification of stakeholder interests who should be consulted in a full assessment.
- A determination of the overall scope of the full assessment.
- A description or agreement of the unit of certification.
- A description of potential obstacles or problems that may be a barrier to certification.
- Quotes for the full assessment (if relevant).

10. The second stage – full assessment

The full assessment involves detailed evaluation and scoring of the fishery against the MSC standard. It is a public and open process that will lead to a decision about whether or not the fishery meets the MSC's *Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing*. In order to come to a decision, the certification body will consult widely with relevant stakeholders (such as industry, government, scientific organisations and environmental groups). This stage also includes a formal process for lodging objections.

Briefly, the process involves the following steps:

1. *Public announcement and targeted stakeholder communications.*
2. *Assessment planning and team selection* – sometimes certification bodies consult with stakeholders about the members of the assessment team, however, this is not mandatory and is determined as much by the relationships in the fishery under assessment as anything else.
3. *Determining Performance Indicators and Scoring Guideposts* and their weighting prior to the assessment visit – these will form what is called an “assessment tree” or assessment hierarchy and are specific to the fishery being evaluated. Scoring Guideposts are produced for each of the Performance Indicators based on 60 – the minimum mark, 80 – as the unconditional ‘pass mark’ and 100 – upper boundary of scoring expected in a theoretically ‘perfect’ fishery.
4. *Consultation with the client, MSC and stakeholders about the draft assessment tree* – This is to obtain feedback about whether the assessment hierarchy is appropriate to the size, scale, ecology, geography and technology of the fishery, as well as consistent with the MSC standard. Based on this review, the assessment tree is finalised. See **Box 1**.
5. *Assessment visits and information collection* – at this stage client organisations must provide to the certification body as much information and data on their fishery as possible. This is used by the assessment team to inform the scoring process.
6. *Stakeholder visits and opportunity to submit views in writing* – this is the stakeholders’ opportunity to provide input into the evaluation process, along with any verifiable evidence relevant to the assessment.
7. *Scoring the fishery* – the assessment team uses an analytical model designed to allow quantitative and qualitative evaluation of the fishery. For more information on this process contact the MSC or download the document ‘*Using AHP and Expert Choice to Support the MSC Fishery Assessment Process*’ from the MSC’s website.
8. *Interpreting the scores* – the fishery needs to obtain a score of 60 or more for each Performance Indicator and Criterion in order to be certified. If a fishery achieves a score of less than 60 on any Performance Indicator and Criterion certification will not be awarded. The fishery must have an aggregate score of 80 or more for each of the three Principles in order to be certified. Any passing scores for individual Performance Indicators less than 80 mean that conditions will be set.
9. *Conditions* – the certification body is likely to have identified some areas for improvement within the fishery. The certification body will specify an appropriate timescale for addressing each condition and should specify the outcomes that will meet the standard. The certification body cannot tell you what to do to address a particular problem, only the desired outcome, leaving the decision to you on how this is to be achieved. Before a certification body will issue a certificate, however, agreement must be reached between client and certification body that the conditions will be met and an indication of how they may be met. In some cases, the management agency may need to be consulted by the

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client and certification body if any conditions require their input or investment. To date every fishery has been certified with conditions.

10. *Consultation with the client, MSC and stakeholders about proposed peer reviewers.*
11. *Preliminary draft report produced – review by client.*
12. *Peer review draft report produced – reviewed by chosen experts.*
13. *Public Comment draft report produced – stakeholders' review and comment period.*
14. *Final Report produced – once published on the website, anyone who has participated in the assessment process has 21 days in which to lodge a statement of intent to submit an objection. If no objections are lodged during this period the Determination in the Final Report becomes the certification decision.*
15. *Objections procedure (if required) – objection goes first to certification body then, if response not considered adequate, an objection can be directed to the MSC. If an objection is heard, additional process steps follow.*
16. *Action plan (if appropriate) – a plan developed by you as the client outlining activities aimed at meeting conditions of certification and time frames, submitted to certification body for approval.*
17. *Certificate issued (if appropriate) and Public Certification Report – produced by the certification body for the client and publication on the MSC website.*

Box 1

Helping create a smooth full assessment

The fishery assessment tree is a crucial element of the fishery assessment process – it defines how a fishery's performance will be assessed and scored. It interprets the MSC standard specifically and defines the biological and fishery management attributes that are required to pass the standard, as well as achieve the level of performance so that conditions are not required.

It is essential that you carefully review the draft assessment tree to determine that your fishery will be assessed in a manner consistent with the MSC standard, and provide your comments to the certification body. If the fishery is complex, you may need to consult your own experts to assist your review or you could pre-arrange with the relevant management agency to play a role.

It is more difficult towards the end of the assessment process when reviewing the Draft Report to argue with the basis for scoring particular performance indicators if you haven't actively engaged in reviewing the draft assessment tree.

During the data collection and analysis phase, you can help ensure a smooth process by organising your information and data submissions to the certification body according to the structure of the assessment tree. You might also make a case to the certification body about why you believe certain information translates into a specific score for each performance indicator in the assessment tree.

By being thorough and timely at both these stages of the assessment process, you can help the assessment project proceed smoothly and efficiently, thereby saving time and potentially money.

11. My fishery is certified – so what happens next?

If the fishery is certified, it will be subject to an annual audit (at a minimum).

Post certification audits

A program of surveillance visits or audits will be established between the client and the certification body. These are partly based on the timelines indicated by any conditions of certification.

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While the minimum requirement is for an annual audit, the certification body has the right to conduct an unannounced audit at any time or schedule more frequent audits if circumstances indicate the need. These may have budgetary implications for clients, so you should ensure your budget includes sufficient funds to cover audits for the duration of the certificate.

Each audit will examine any significant changes that might have occurred either in the physical environment or in the management of the fishery. Each audit will also examine whether the fishery client is satisfactorily addressing any certification conditions.

Failure to make adequate progress can be enough justification for the certification body to suspend or withdraw your certificate. Annual audit reports are public documents, posted on the MSC website.

Maximising the benefits

The process does not end with the granting of the fishery certificate. There are a number of actions and activities which you as the fishery client need to either undertake or be aware of in order to gain maximum benefit from the certificate:

- *Chain of custody and logo licensing* – Businesses (generally commercial or post harvest) that wish to display the MSC logo on their products need to know that certified product is traceable through every link in the supply chain. This protects against uncertified products entering the supply chain displaying fraudulent claims and unscrupulous companies from realising benefits they have neither paid for nor deserve.

Thus each link in the chain needs to undergo a chain of custody audit and where appropriate obtain a licence to use the MSC logo. See the MSC website (www.msc.org) for information and guidance about the chain of custody process.

Both the chain of custody and logo licensing procedure will have additional budgetary implications. Should you have any queries with regard to these issues you should contact the MSC directly.

- *The marketing edge* – Retailers and consumers want certified product, especially in Europe. As the MSC logo has become more widely recognised the demand for certified product has grown, currently outstripping supply. Gaining certification can open new doors for your product. Contact your regional MSC office for information and advice.

12. Need more advice?

MSC staff are always willing to respond to inquiries and, where appropriate, provide assistance and advice. Establishing a working relationship with the most local MSC contact person is important. He or she can also put clients in contact with other MSC staff that may have specialist expertise.

Where to find out more information from the MSC

The MSC website (www.msc.org) has a large amount of information, including names of accredited certification bodies and useful documents.

If you'd like to speak to someone in person, please contact your regional MSC office. We have offices in the following locations:

**MSC International Headquarters
(covers Europe, Middle East and Africa)**
Unit 4 Bakery Place
119 Altenburg Gardens
London SW11 1JQ
UK
Email: info@msc.org
Tel: + 44 (0)20 7350 4000
Fax: + 44 (0)20 7350 1231

MSC Office (Americas)
2110 N. Pacific Street,
Suite 102
Seattle, WA 98103
USA
Email: info@msc.org
Tel: + 1 206 691 0188
Fax: + 1 206 691 0190

MSC Office (Asia Pacific)
10/46-48 Urunga Parade
Miranda NSW 2228
Australia
Email: Duncan.Leadbitter@msc.org
Tel: + 61 (0)2 9524 8400
Fax: + 61 (0)2 9524 8900

Contact other fishery certification clients

Clients may also find that clients for other fishery assessments are a good source of information or advice.

In researching and preparing this document MSC staff found that most representatives of client organisations were willing to discuss the process with prospective fishery certification clients.

Details of client contacts can be found on the MSC website, or contact the MSC directly for more information.

Appendix One – Useful documents and Information and where to find them

Information	Where to find
MSC Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing	http://www.msc.org/html/content_504.htm
MSC Fisheries Certification Methodology	Contact the MSC directly – email to fisheries@msc.org
Using AHP and Expert Choice to Support the MSC Fisheries Certification Process	http://www.msc.org/assets/docs/fishery_certification/UsingAHP&ECforMSCCert_V2_Sep2005.pdf
MSC Accreditation Manual	Contact the MSC directly – email to fisheries@msc.org
List of accredited certification bodies	http://www.msc.org/html/content_501.htm
Client contacts	http://www.msc.org/html/content_484.htm (click on individual fishery name to reveal information and contact details)
Chain of Custody Standard and Methodology	Contact the MSC directly – email to info@msc.org
International Eco-labelling in Fisheries	Contact the MSC directly – email to fisheries@msc.org
Guidance for Certification Bodies on Stakeholder Consultation in MSC Fishery Assessments	Contact the MSC directly – email to fisheries@msc.org
Guidance for Stakeholders on how to engage in the MSC fishery assessment process.	Under development

