

# Australia Mackerel Icefish



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SPECIES Australia mackerel icefish  
(*Champscephalus gunnari*)

FISHING METHOD Bottom and  
midwater trawl

COUNTRY Australia

LOCATION



Off Heard Island and McDonald Islands (HIMI), a volcanic group in the Southern Ocean – 4,000km south-west of Perth and close to Antarctica

FISHERY TONNAGE Approximately  
1,000 tonnes

“THE MSC HAS put mackerel icefish on the map,” says David Carter, CEO of Austral Fisheries, the Australian company that harvests mainly Patagonian toothfish but regards this pale and delicate Antarctic fish, complete with its own natural anti-freeze, as “a secondary species to our core business”.

When he mentions maps, I look at one myself to check the location of this Australian overseas territory where Austral Fisheries’ one and only mackerel icefish vessel operates. Close to the ever-shifting outline of Antarctica, HIMI (as the islands are known) is bang in the middle of the Southern Ocean – a “closed ecosystem”, contained within the biological barrier formed when cold Antarctic waters meet warmer currents from the north. HIMI is the only example in the world of an untouched sub-Antarctic island ecosystem, providing breeding and feeding areas for many marine mammals and birds. These islands – and the seas around them – were declared a Wilderness

### ‘Extremely high’ level of monitoring and compliance

Reserve in 1992, and the territory is on the World Heritage list. Not surprisingly, the adjacent mackerel icefish fishery has been subject to rigorous policing and management by, respectively, the Australian Fisheries Management Authority (AFMA) and CCAMLR (Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources) – an international commission of 25 nations which seeks to manage Antarctic fisheries with biodiversity and ecosystem stability in mind.

To combat illegal fishing of Patagonian toothfish, the Australian government has committed several hundred million dollars to surveillance using a permanent patrol vessel. Monitoring meets “extremely high standards”, the MSC certifiers wrote in 2006, compliance measures are “excellent” and the catch, of both target and non-target species, is accurately recorded on a haul-by-haul basis. Quantitative stock assessment is “world class”, they added.

### Increased scientific rigour

Despite this, there were uncertainties about the methodology used, so the certifiers imposed a condition that the fishery should “provide evidence” that “the current stock designations are the best choice for conservation, and more precautionary” (ie, erring on the conservative side) than other methods.

“For us,” says Carter, “the real gain of MSC certification has been in that area of greater scientific rigour, peer review and outside thinking on the science of stock assessment. It threw up some alternative approaches – other hypotheses to test in the way the stock was managed – and that has been a useful process. It has added to the quality of the stock assessment we are doing with icefish.”

Similarly, a condition requiring the fishery to assess the ecological risk of bottom trawling, including benthic impacts, “spun off quite a bit of research”, Carter says. “We’ve been down there with cameras mounted on trawls, to see how the net interacts with the bottom. That whole area of inquiry, which came with the imperative of an MSC condition, kick-started a project that is partly funded by the Australian Fisheries Research and Development Corporation.”

In this fishery, the certifiers noted, there is a detailed knowledge of the gear types used (both bottom and midwater trawl) and each is used in particular locations and at certain times, in order to reduce the risk of impact on threatened, protected or iconic species. “We ticked all the MSC boxes,” says Carter, an achievement in such an ecologically fragile area. “Meeting the gold standard is a way of saying to the world: we think we are damn good, the fishery is in good hands and there are high levels of quality science and transparency in our day-to-day operations. It was something we had to do.”

“ Before certification, we were making certain assumptions in our stock assessments and modelling arrangements for mackerel icefish. By running these past the MSC team, we found we had other brains to draw on, people who were also highly skilled in fisheries management. Our assumptions were tested, and the fishery is better for that experience ”

David Carter, CEO, Austral Fisheries, Perth, Western Australia



“ Australian mackerel icefish are managed to CCAMLR standards or better, which already include precautionary targets and limits and an extensive review at its annual meetings. Nevertheless, MSC certification provides a public acknowledgement of the high standards used in the management of this resource and provides a much more recognizable face to the consumer ”

Dr Malcolm Haddon, Chair of Commonwealth Sub-Antarctic Resource Assessment Group