

Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group North Sea Herring



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SPECIES North Sea herring
(*Clupea harengus*)

FISHING METHOD Pelagic trawl

COUNTRY United Kingdom

LOCATION



Mainly the Buchan sub-stock of herring in the north and central North Sea, inside the exclusive economic zone (EEZ) of the EU and Norway

FISHERY TONNAGE 15,000 tonnes (2009)

THIS IS THE serious face of UK fishing – 25 modern trawlers 60-70m long, fitted with tanks of refrigerated seawater into which fish are pumped direct from the net without manual handling. Equipped with sonar, they track down shoals of herring in the far reaches of the North Sea and, returning to port, discharge them into one of six processing plants. The fish is exported to Russia, Germany, Ukraine and West Africa. Given all this, the fleet has had its share of critics.

“For us, MSC certification was a way of demonstrating that these criticisms were not properly founded”, says John Goodlad, Chairman of the Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group (SPSG). Derek Duthie, Company Secretary of the SPSG, puts it another way: “We can claim that we are sustainable until the cows come home, and whether people believe it or not is their choice. When an independent certifier comes along and confirms it, that gives credibility to those claims.”

Modern technology for better targeted fishing

So what makes this fishery sustainable? To begin with, modern electronic equipment – such as sonar, net and catch monitors – has made the method of fishing more precise. “We are targeting one type of fish,” Duthie explains, “and the seasons are different for herring, mackerel and blue whiting. You know, when you are going out of the harbour, what species you are going to target.”

Because sonar can distinguish shoals of herring from mackerel (which don't have a swim bladder), bycatch is low – about two per cent, according to the MSC certification report. Most of it is mackerel, which is fed into the SPSG mackerel fishery certified in January 2009. Investment in technology such as ‘size discriminators’ (which send out echo beams to determine the size and species of fish in a shoal) has improved selectivity. If a mixed shoal is landed,

the skipper announces it over the radio so other vessels stay away.

Observers who, under a mandatory EU ruling, sail on some vessels, say there has been no bycatch of cetaceans – marine mammals such as whales and porpoises. Midwater trawls do not pass over the seabed, so they neither damage it nor catch demersal species such as cod, haddock and whiting.

Action plan to strengthen stock

Nevertheless, some conditions had to be met before the fishery could be certified. For example, together with the Pelagic Freezer-Trawler Association (PFA) – another MSC-certified herring fishery – it had to draw up an action plan to help rebuild the herring stock that it fishes in the North Sea.

Maintain market share

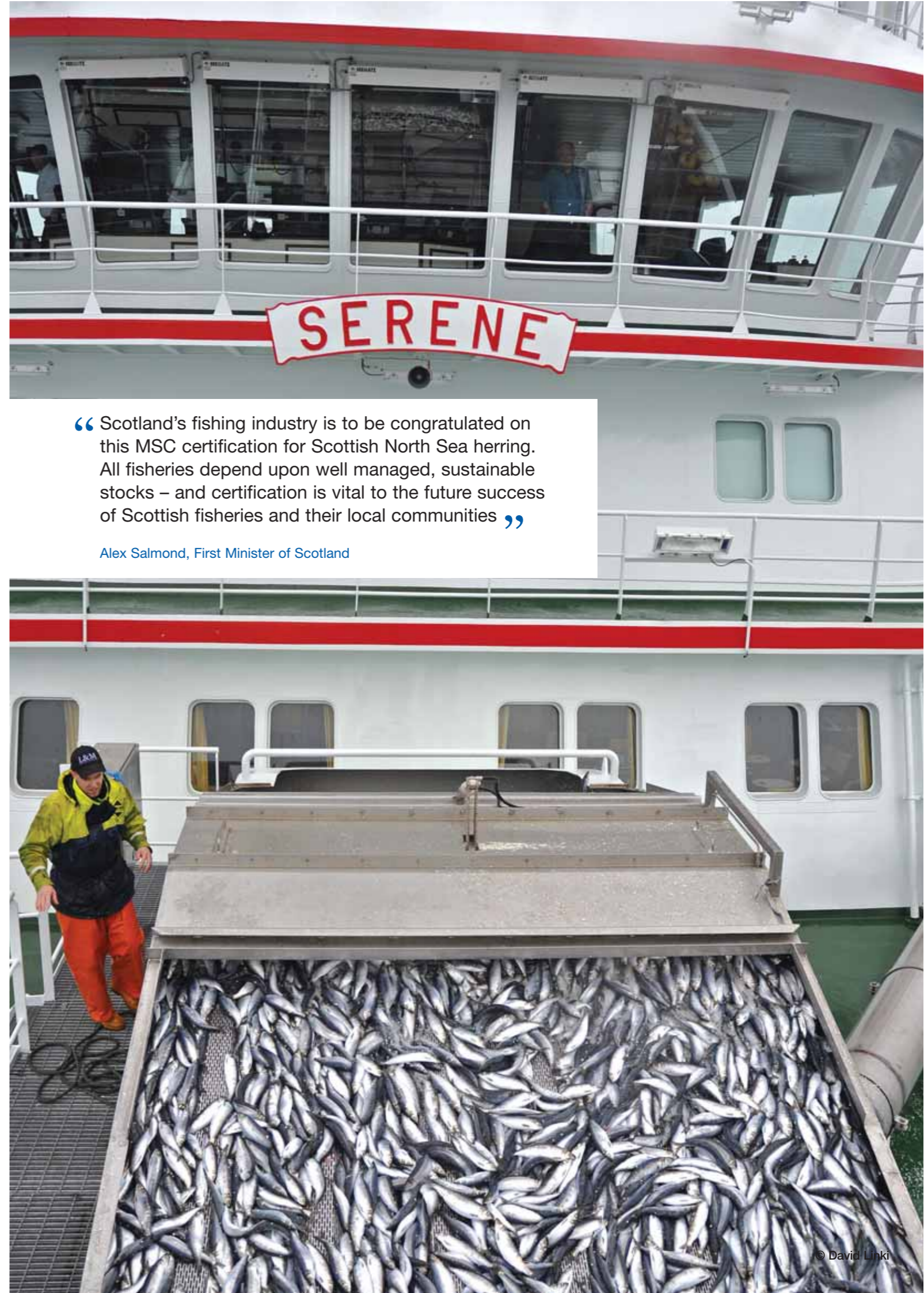
“We are doing this primarily because it is the right thing to do,” Goodlad stresses. “There is a big focus now on sustainability, and if we as an industry don't move that way, we will be out of step with the world.” Carrying the MSC logo on the entire catch is also a marketing consideration, he says. “If we don't do this, and other people are doing it, we might lose our market.”

So far, after just one summer of fishing, there has been no sign of a price premium: in Russia, Ukraine and West Africa, MSC “doesn't mean a lot at the moment”, says Goodlad. In other “small but significant” markets that the fishery sells into, retailers are recognising the importance of the MSC label.

“Even during certification,” says Goodlad, “some of our German customers were saying, ‘Look, we really want to go down the MSC route. Is there a real prospect of you getting this certification?’ We told them there was, and they said, ‘That's great. When is it going to happen?’ The two slotted together quite nicely. Our existing market wanted us to do it just as we were completing it.”

“Scotland's fishing industry is to be congratulated on this MSC certification for Scottish North Sea herring. All fisheries depend upon well managed, sustainable stocks – and certification is vital to the future success of Scottish fisheries and their local communities”

Alex Salmond, First Minister of Scotland



“There is no contradiction in being modern, technologically efficient, highly productive, profitable – and yet being sustainable. Recognition of that is the huge thing the MSC has achieved for this sector”

John Goodlad, Chairman, Scottish Pelagic Sustainability Group