

The MSC Quality and Consistency Project

Regional Workshops

As part of Phase 1 of the MSC Quality and Consistency (Q & C) Project, the policy team (Rich Lincoln, Daniel Suddaby and Alice McDonald) held regional workshops in:

- Bangkok - Thailand (19 April 2006),
- Kuala Lumpur - Malaysia (21 April 2006),
- Perth - Australia (24 April 2006),
- Melbourne - Australia (26 April 2006), and
- Brussels - Belgium (11 May 2006).

The objective of the regional workshops was to discuss the interpretation of the MSC Standard, specifically the MSC *Principles and Criteria for Sustainable Fishing* (Ps & Cs), with a variety of people that had experience in operationally applying the MSC Standard in fisheries assessment and those with an interest or expertise in the MSC program. Participants in the workshops included a range of MSC stakeholders including clients, NGOs, fishing industry, fishery managers, certification bodies (CBs), government officials, seafood processors and scientists.

In addition to providing valuable input to the Q & C Project, the workshops provided an excellent opportunity for MSC to meet a wide range of stakeholders and provide an open forum for discussion of the MSC Standard and the fishery certification programme in general. Summary of points raised in relation to interpretation and application of the Ps & Cs is provided below.

General points

Definitions

- Terms used in the Ps & Cs that are considered to be broad and open to varied interpretations included:
 - Precautionary,
 - Ecosystem,
 - Appropriate,
 - Recovery,
 - Depleted,
 - Long-term,
 - Potential yield.

Language

- Interpretation of the Ps & Cs into languages other than English enhances stakeholder understanding of the MSC Standard, however it is important that interpretation considers the fishing and cultural context of the country/language.

Uncertainty and risk – the use of risk assessments

- There are high levels of uncertainty and risk in quantitatively assessing some aspects of the Ps & Cs. A risk assessment approach could: identify the uncertainty in various aspects of a fisheries management system; quantify the level of risk; and thereby create the potential to reduce the need for expensive information collection to meet the MSC Standard.
- Risk assessment processes can be highly subjective and there are a number of different types of risk assessments being used. To minimise potential bias all relevant stakeholders need to be involved and agree to the process.
- Differences exist in current ecological risk assessment approaches. Given the ever-increasing relevance of this method to fisheries management and future MSC assessments of data-deficient fisheries, it was suggested that MSC seriously consider developing guidance on their use in the certification process. In doing this MSC should define what level of qualitative and quantitative assessments are acceptable, and what is considered a credible risk assessment process.

- Some discussion occurred regarding the value of an MSC sponsored workshop on current environmental risk assessment approaches being used in fisheries management in order to define possible guidance for this tool's appropriate use in MSC assessments.

Application to multi-species fisheries

- Many fisheries in Asia have no single target species and retain all catch, the definition of target species and bycatch becomes blurred.
- Data in some multi-species artisanal fisheries is often collected at a broader level than species, e.g., species group like 'shark', 'prawns' and 'fish'. This makes it difficult to satisfy the requirements of an MSC assessment (especially Principle 1 (P1)), although the management may be quite precautionary.
- Perhaps a risk assessment approach could provide a framework to enable such fisheries to enter the MSC program. (*see discussion above*)

Standardisation of application

- Many clients and stakeholders do not consider that there has been consistent application of the MSC Standard across fishery assessments.
- The role of certification bodies in ensuring consistent interpretation of the Ps & Cs by the Certification Bodies is central to maintaining quality and consistency across fishery assessments against the MSC Standard.
- There was a perception among some clients that the bar was being raised on the required performance for a fishery to meet the MSC Standard; that rather than sustainable management and progress, MSC certification requires perfection.
- Assessment teams may have different standards; for example, an Australian group of experts may have a more conservative approach by nature, or as a consequence of their training and experience, than other experts.

Generic guidelines for fishery groups

- Some guidelines on interpreting the Ps & Cs for similar fisheries would assist with improving consistency.
- If guidelines are to be grouped, then gear type would be the most appropriate category considering the similarities in target species and ecosystem impacts.
- New Zealand deepwater fishery representatives are considering drafting some generic guidelines for whitefish fisheries in collaboration with other certified fishery clients.

Shifting baselines

- What baselines should be considered for assessment of stock biomass and ecosystem state in evaluating P1 and Principle 2 (P2)? For example, should the virgin stock biomass be considered the reference point (although it is often difficult to determine accurately)? This also relate to the benthic impact of trawl fisheries in areas that have been trawled for decades.

Information collection requirements

- Many of the Criteria could be interpreted to require unreasonable and expensive data collection, which may provide little value to management of the fishery. For example measuring genetic structure and egg production can be unrealistic for some target species and stocks. MSC should provide clarity or guidance on the limit to what can be expected or required.

Cross-jurisdictional issues

- Does the requirement for effective management just apply to the country that is part of the fishery assessment when a number of countries exploit the same stock? Cross-jurisdictional management of fisheries is a big issue within the Asian region, and due to a lack of inter-jurisdictional cooperation, management and exchange of information, it may be a barrier to some nations/regions fisheries applying for MSC certification.

Principle 1 (P1)

- P1 seems particularly reliant on stock assessments, which are not available for many fisheries, particularly in Asia.
- Although management of a fishery may be precautionary, there is difficulty in determining whether a fish species is depleted where the fishery dependent and/or fishery-independent data are not comprehensive.
- How do you maintain consistency across fisheries when the appropriate management measures will vary across fisheries and target species?
- How is community based management built into consideration of target species management? (*Also applicable to P2 and Principle 3 (P3)*)
- Indices of sustainability can be determined for fisheries without advanced stock assessments or sophisticated data collection, however there must be verification that they are appropriate and robust indices of sustainability.
- Strategies have been established for managing fisheries depleted due to over-fishing, however how does an assessment consider a fishery depleted due to natural fluctuations? How can such a fishery be managed for recovery considering uncertainties in the ongoing impacts of natural factors?
- The impact on fisheries from changes within the ecosystem is going to become a bigger issue as global warming continues, therefore MSC should consider how this will be assessed in the Ps & Cs.
- There is a challenge in establishing a baseline for reproductive capacity in the P1 C3 context..
- Fishing is a naturally selective activity therefore a fish stock will adapt to that and there will always be an impact. All things that change age/sex/size will impair reproductive capacity to some degree. So, what impact is acceptable?
- C3 is not significant enough as a stand-alone criterion, rather it should sit within C1.
- MSC should develop guidance on appropriate precautionary reference and target limits.
- If a fishery is severely depleted, does it have to recover (and prove the effectiveness of the recovery plan) before it enters MSC certification?
- High productivity is quite different to sustainable levels – e.g. a stock could be at carrying capacity and subject to low (and therefore sustainable) harvest levels and have low productivity. The definition of high productivity must be clarified.
- The reference to ecological communities in this principle may provide opportunity for duplication with parts of P2.

Principle 2 (P2)

- P2 needs the most clarification – What is the definition of ‘ecosystem’ (what is the scope)? What are significant/appropriate/acceptable impacts? What is the benchmark for depleted?
- This is a very difficult Principle to meet due to the lack of understanding of ecosystems, fishery impacts, managing these impacts and establishing benchmarks.
- The impact of fishing on communities and trophic structures is still not well understood. This adds to the difficulty in assessing how these impacts are managed in a fishery. In addition, our understanding of the marine environment is constantly changing, therefore management and the MSC process need to adapt.
- Could humans (villages/communities) be considered part of the ecosystem?
- This principle highlights the need for a balance between knowledge and mitigation.
- How are cumulative impacts considered in the MSC process? Perhaps this is outside the scope of an MSC fishery assessment and is best addressed by governments or Regional Fishery Management Organisations (RFMOs).
- The segregation of species into target (P1) and non-target (P2) seems to limit a fisheries ability to (sustainably) shift target species due to changes in market demands or species abundance.
- There is increasing recognition, particularly of late in developing countries, that protecting critical habitats is crucial to precautionary fisheries management.
- Ecosystem research and management works on a long timescale; achievements take longer than the certification time frame (5 years).
- It's important, under in P2, not only to consider management measures that are implemented specifically to address P2 issues, but also the current strategies that incidentally minimise impacts on the ecosystem and associated species.
- When addressing benthic habitat, particularly in response to trawl impacts, what proportion of protection is appropriate? Can similar habitats that are protected but are outside the actual certification area be considered when assessing benthic habitat and levels of impact and/or protection? A reasonable approach would be to assess it as you would a fishery that is a small part of a larger stock – the assessment would consider the habitat impacts as part of the broader spatial context within which the fishery operates.
- The MSC should develop a position on what is considered an acceptable mortality of endangered, threatened and protected (ETP) species. Cultural and political context will have a significant influence on what is acceptable within particular fisheries. In the future fisheries that legally and sustainably take ETP species may be certified and the MSC will need to be prepared for potential response from NGOs and markets.
- P2 C3 could be quite open to interpretation and theoretically could be approached a number of different ways. It is unclear whether P2 C3 applies to habitat degradation as well as just species.
- P2 C2 is made up of two separate parts, the first of which (biological diversity) is often brushed over. This criteria can be difficult to clearly interpret or understand.

Principle 3 (P3)

- Due to the prescriptive nature of much of P3, it is considered by clients to be the easiest principle to apply in a fishery assessment.
- P3 is too prescriptive in places (e.g. C A10e), lacks the flexibility of implementing strategies that suit the fishery and the context that it operates within. Also the criteria in P3 B (Operational) is more prescriptive than P3 A (Management Systems) through the use of terms like 'shall' as opposed to 'observe' and 'respect'.
- While P1 and P2 are about outcomes, P3 is about inputs. It could be argued that without some of the inputs required under P3 you could still have a well-managed and sustainable fishery.
- Clarity needs to be provided on the relationship between the P3 criteria and aspects of P1 and P2.
- Need to ensure that the intent captures the need for adaptive management (as inferred in C A7). This was discussed in relation to the ability of a certified fishery to react to external influences (for example a tsunami), and whether the impact of the tsunami would lead to it losing certification or if an appropriate management response would allow the fishery to stay certified.
- What is the precautionary approach and how is it applied to management and measured? Applying precaution is difficult, unclear and often highly subjective. How do you therefore make a judgement of it objectively?
- Note that some destructive fishing methods are considered traditional in some areas, and/or are legal. However it's unlikely that a fishery with blast or cyanide fishing would come forward for certification.
- Funding for monitoring and enforcement is often lacking in Southeast Asia, particularly in relation to IUU fishing.
- P3 C B12 and B13 are very similar to P2 C2, therefore repetition in scoring is likely with this current structure unless intent clarifies the difference.
- It can take a significant amount of time for experts to understand the legislative context of the fishery – this impacts on the time and cost of the assessment.
- Some aspects of P3 require changes to legislated processes which can take a significant amount of time (and may be out of the fishery clients' control), therefore limiting a fishery's ability to be 'timely'.
- Although social impacts are briefly referred to (C A4 and C A6), full consideration of socio-economic issues still seems somewhat outside the scope of fishery assessments. However, interpretive guidance on this is clearly needed, as there could be a wide range of responses from assessment teams in addressing these criteria. There is a need to ensure that these issues are not just 'considered' or 'observed' but are part of an effective functional management system.
- 'Observe the legal and customary right' could be interpreted to just pay lip-service to the need to consider the impact of a fishery on a community that relies on it.
- Current assessment team structure generally would not have the expertise to consider the cultural context of a fishery – local help would certainly be required.
- P3 C7 is open to wide variations in interpretation, particularly 'the best available information using a precautionary approach'.
- C A10b could be defined as not allowing trawl if a more benign method could catch the same target species. Without clarification of the intent of this criterion, this could provide serious issues for certain fisheries depending on the interpretation by the CB and external stakeholders.