



JOIN THE MSC IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

A guide for fisheries to go through the verification process

 **MSC**
Improvement
Program



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LET'S GET STARTED

The MSC has developed its Improvement Program to incentivise improvements towards levels where fisheries can confidently enter the MSC certification program.

The aim of this guide is to give you an overview of what to expect during each stage of the MSC Improvement Program. We hope it will help to ensure that your fishery's entry and progress verifications are efficient and effective. If you have questions at any stage, your local MSC representative is happy to help.

[Contact us](#)



ELIGIBLE AND NON-ELIGIBLE FISHERIES

Which fisheries can apply?

The MSC promotes equal access to its Improvement and Certification programs for wild-capture fisheries, regardless of their size, scale, location or technology.

Type of fisheries that are eligible:

- Single species
- Multi-species
- Trawl
- Longline
- Hand raked
- Pots and traps
- 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)
- Entities that have been convicted for forced and child 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)
- Fisheries with members of the client group convicted for a serious crime
- Fisheries with members of the client group convicted for shark finning

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

- Catch and grow fisheries, e.g. rope-grown mussels
- Hatch and catch fisheries, e.g. wild capture salmon where some stocking takes place
- Habitat modified fisheries, e.g. providing casitas (artificial habitats) to attract and retain lobster, or using Fish-Aggregating Devices (FADs)

If you think your fishery may be an enhanced fishery, your CAB can help you check whether it falls within the scope of the MSC program (see p.7 for more information on CABs).

Additional eligibility criteria for the MSC Improvement Program

For your fishery to be eligible to join the MSC Improvement Program, the following criteria must be met:

- Submit a pre-assessment report (or a full assessment report¹) completed no more than 3 years prior to the application
- Submit a credible Improvement Action Plan with achievable timelines and likely to deliver a pass score against the MSC Fisheries Standard in a timeframe of maximum 5 years

All eligibility criteria are verified by a CAB during the eligibility verification process (see p.7 for more information).

Guide to relevant scheme documents

The [MSC Improvement Program Requirements and Guidance](#) – this is the set of requirements that a fishery joining the program will be verified against.

The [MSC Scope Declaration](#) – for applicant fisheries to fill in and provide to the CAB to confirm they are within the scope of MSC.

The [MSC Labour Eligibility Requirements](#) - sets out labour requirements that applicant fisheries must meet to be eligible for the MSC Improvement Program.

The [MSC Rules on Unacceptable Conduct](#) - sets out the review process and steps to be taken when the MSC identifies unacceptable conduct in relation to a fishery in the Improvement Program or an applicant.

The [MSC Chain of Custody Program: Supplementary Standard and Certification Requirements for the MSC Improvement Program](#) – sets out the requirements for Improvement products to enter MSC certified supply chains (see p.11 for more information on Improvement products).

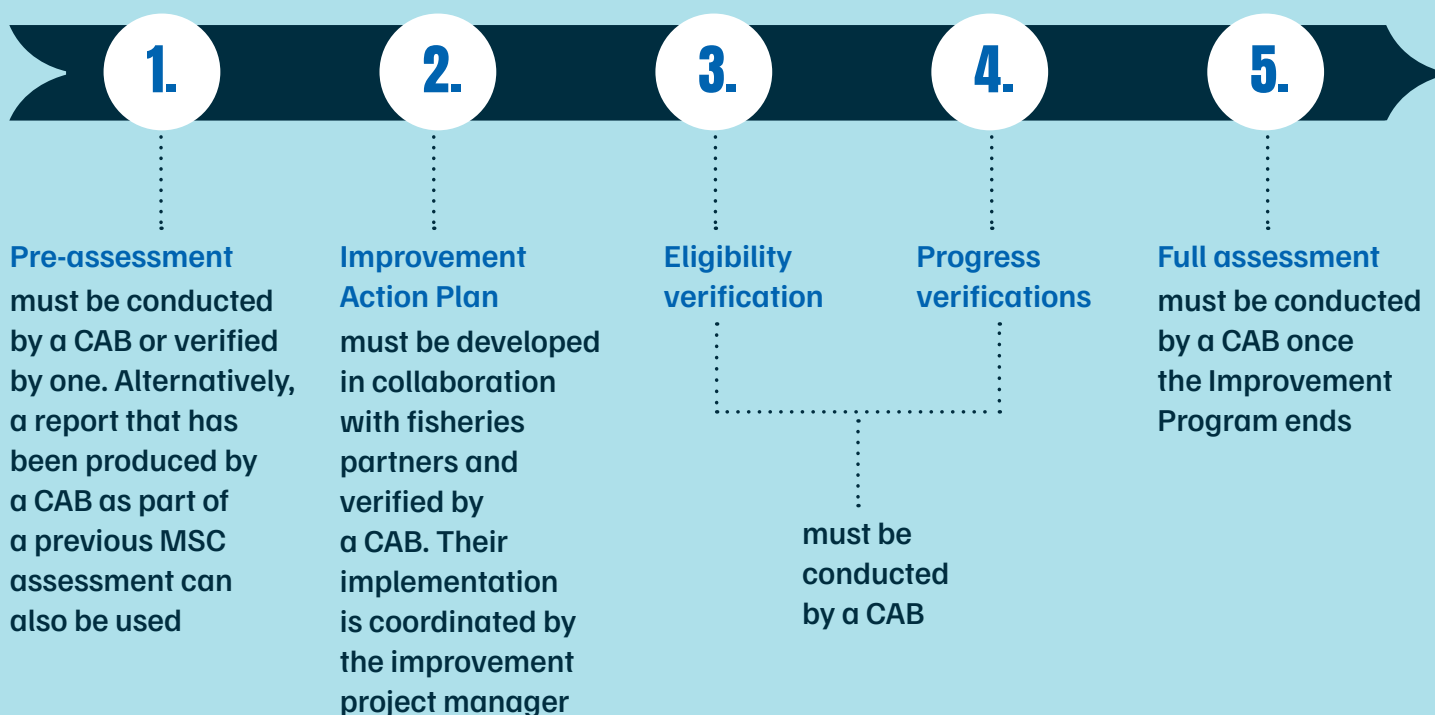
The following normative documents must be used when applying to, and remaining compliant with, the MSC Improvement Program. The latest versions can be found in the [Improvement Tools section](#) of the msc.org website:

- **MSC Pre-Assessment Reporting Template** – to provide an overview of how your fishery performs against the MSC Fisheries Standard, allowing for gaps in performance to be identified.
- **MSC Fishery Improvement Action Plan Template** – to help your fishery develop an Improvement Action Plan to address the gaps in a fishery's environmental performance.
- **MSC Benchmarking and Tracking Tool Template** – to allow your fishery to benchmark its environmental performance against the MSC Fisheries Standard, and to track the actual and expected progress of your fishery.
- **MSC Improvement Program Progress Reporting Template** – to report on the progress made by your fishery against the Improvement Action Plan.

¹A full assessment report is any report produced during an MSC assessment or audit against the MSC Fisheries Standard including Announcement Comment Draft Report (ACDR), Client and Peer Review Draft Report (CPRDR), Public Comment Draft Report (PCDR), Final Draft Report (FDR), Public Certification Report (PCR) and Surveillance Report or Expedited Audit Report.

STEPS OF THE IMPROVEMENT PROGRAM

Preparation and good project management are key to ensuring a smooth, timely and cost-effective improvement project.



Recommendations for engaging a CAB

- Get quotes from two or more CABs to ensure that you get the best value for money
- For the development of your pre-assessment and your Improvement Action Plan, you can also get quotes from MSC technical consultants
- Ensure that they have a good knowledge and understanding of your fishery, or of other similar fisheries
- Ask CABs any questions or share any uncertainties that you may have
- Check their availability suits your timescales and that the timings they have suggested are feasible given the complexity of your fishery and the timing of any seasonal part of the fishery
- Ask them to provide testimonials from recent fishery clients

All CABs listed on the [Assurance Services International website](#) have been approved by this independent organization to conduct MSC fishery assessments. Search for those listed with Scope: MSC Fisheries and you will get a full list of accredited certification bodies

All MSC technical consultants listed on the [register](#) are fisheries experts who understand the requirements of the MSC Standard. They can help conduct pre-assessments and develop Improvement Action Plans. If your pre-assessment is completed by an MSC technical consultant, it will have to be verified by a CAB as part of the entry verification for the Improvement Program. MSC technical consultants also have the qualifications to help you develop an Improvement Action Plan (Step 2, p.8).

Defining the contract

Once you have chosen a CAB, you will likely sign a contract for the work, including eligibility verification and further progress verifications for the duration of the Improvement Action Plan.

Building up a relationship with your CAB during the Improvement Program provides business continuity and efficiencies when your fishery transitions to full assessment against the Fisheries Standard. If you are not satisfied with the service provided by your CAB, you can change CAB at any point during the Improvement Program or when you transition to full assessment, in line with the contract that you have signed with them.

Costs and sources of funding

The project manager pays the CAB for the verifications. Anecdotal information from fisheries in the Improvement Program suggests that the cost can vary from GBP£10,000 - £50,000 for the duration of the Improvement Program. The cost depends on the duration and the scale of the Improvement Action Plan, and the complexity that verifications might entail.

When your fishery transitions to full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard, cost will again depend on complexity and how much information is available from the initial assessment.

There are a range of funding sources and opportunities to assist in your improvements. Fisheries in the Improvement Program are eligible to apply for funding to support the implementation of their Improvement Action Plan via the [Transition Assistance Fund](#) of the MSC's Ocean Stewardship Fund. Your regional MSC contacts can provide you with up-to-date advice on relevant funding options in your regions.



Who's who in the MSC Improvement Program?

Key players and their roles and responsibilities in the Improvement Program

The fishery

A group of vessels who are committed to enter full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard, in a timeframe of no more than 5 years, and who coordinate their formal application to join the MSC Improvement Program through a project manager.

Once a fishery has successfully completed the eligibility verification process, it is listed on the weekly Fisheries Update Newsletter and added to the MSC [Track a Fishery](#) website as an MSC Improvement Program fishery. It can be searched and found by filtering the Unit of Certification status and selecting 'Improvement Program'.

Any fishery that has applied to enter the MSC Improvement Program, prior to the start date of the MSC Improvement Program, is referred to as an 'applicant fishery'.

The project manager

An individual, organisation, or group of organisations who make a formal application to join the MSC Improvement Program on behalf of the fishery. Previous project managers have included fishing industry associations, fisheries cooperatives, local management authorities, consultants, conservation and community groups.

They are appointed for the duration of the MSC Improvement Program with the commitment to undertake the following key responsibilities:

- serve as the key contact between the CAB and the fishery
- coordinate the implementation of the Improvement Action Plan
- collate all necessary information for progress verification, including compiling the progress reports and updating the relevant documentation

The CAB

An independent Conformity Assessment Body (CAB) approved by Assurance Services International to conduct MSC assessments. The CAB is responsible for:

- confirming if an applicant fishery meets the eligibility criteria
- determining if the progress of a fishery in the Improvement Program is adequate or inadequate

Stakeholders

All the different parties who have a role to play in the implementation of the Improvement Action Plan. Previous partners have included supply chain partners, fishing industry partners, NGOs, researchers, and funders.

Deciding on the Unit of Assessment

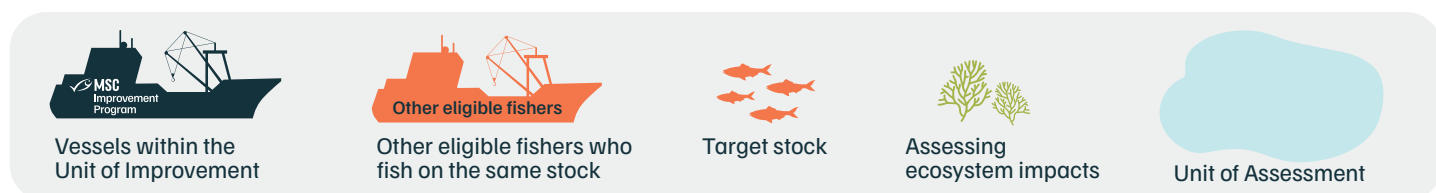
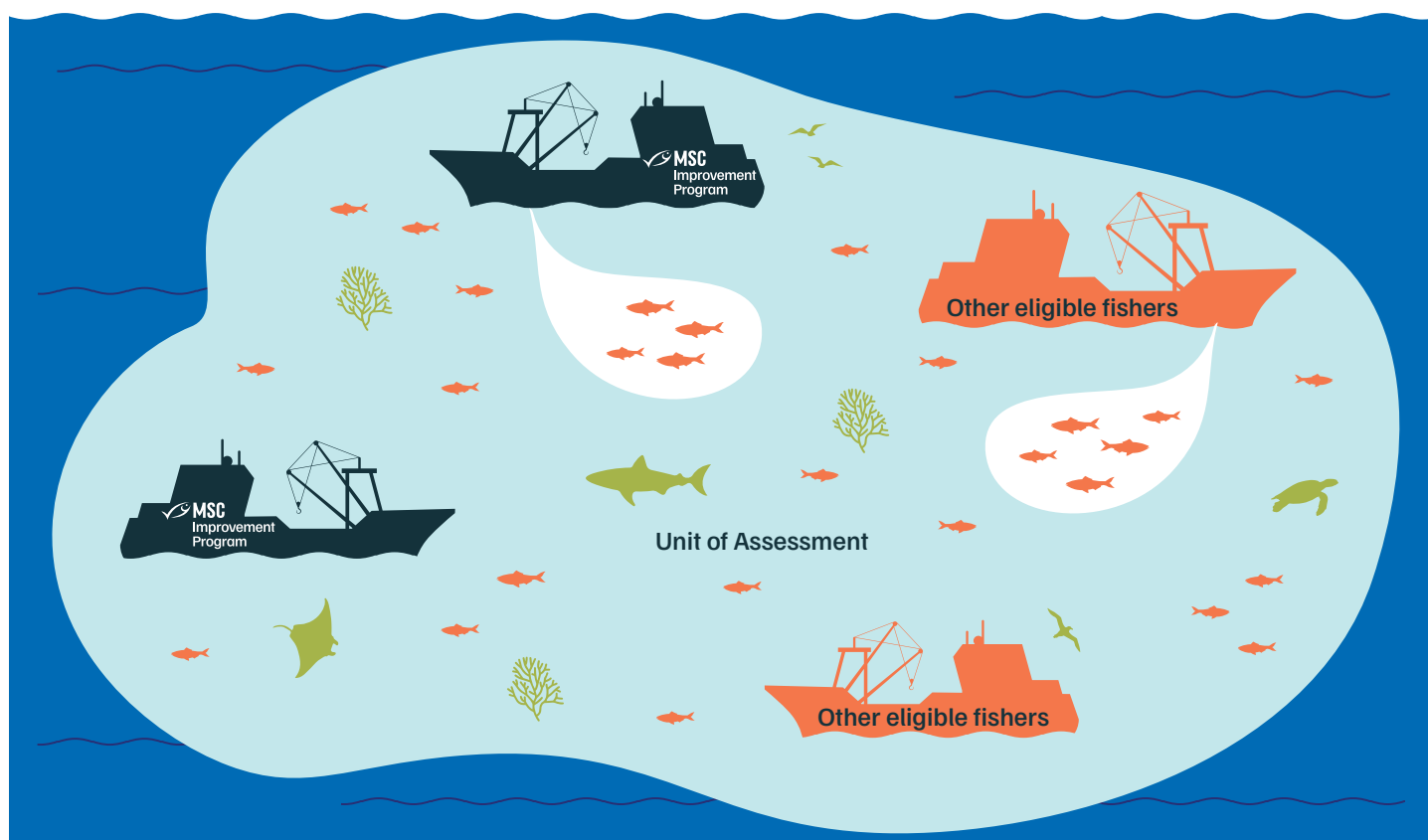
Before starting your application, you and your CAB agree on a Unit of Assessment.

The Unit of Assessment defines what is being pre-assessed against the MSC Fisheries Standard, and the extent of the Improvement Action Plan, based on:

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

Other eligible fishers are those who may not be included in the Improvement Action Plan, or in a future certificate straight away, but who may want to access to it at a later date.

For more information about Units of Certification, please refer to the [Get Certified guide](#).



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 fisheries and fisheries in developing economies during the pre-assessment that you use for the application to join the Improvement Program, and also afterwards during the full assessment. If data are limited, the MSC's Risk-Based Framework (RBF) can be used during the pre-assessment. Scores obtained with the RBF are precautionary, so it is important to start addressing any gaps in data in the Improvement Action Plan.

Find more about the Risk-Based Framework in the [msc.org website](https://www.msc.org).

MSC Chain of Custody certification requirements for the Improvement Program

Products from fisheries in the Improvement Program are not eligible to use the MSC ecolabel. However, once fisheries achieve the minimum acceptable level of ecological performance as described in p.18, they may gain access to MSC Chain of Custody certified supply chains.

As an added benefit, retail products containing their seafood can display a back-of-pack statement indicating their participation in the program following the [MSC Improvement Program Guidelines](#).

For suppliers, retailers, brands and foodservice companies, this provides opportunities to:

- demonstrate support improving fisheries and integrate products into your seafood sourcing strategy
- source seafood from improving fisheries through MSC Chain of Custody certified suppliers, offering the same level of assurance as MSC certified products
- offer consumer assurance through back-of-pack statements
- access verification reports showing progress against defined milestones, provided by accredited CABs

Improvement Action Plan

Progress verifications occur at the dates outlined in the progress verifications schedule in the Improvement Action Plan. They can be offsite or onsite. At least one progress verification shall be conducted onsite around the midway point of the action plan.

Before each progress verification, the project manager will send to the CAB:

- a progress report
- the supporting evidence of progress
- an updated Benchmarking and Tracking tool (BMT)

The CAB will verify all the information provided by the project manager to determine if the progress of the fishery is adequate or inadequate. A fishery with two consecutive inadequate progress determinations will be withdrawn from the Improvement Action Plan.



Transition to full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard

At the end of the improvement period, once the Action Plan has been implemented, your fishery is ready to transition to a full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard having completed several years of work to give it a greater chance of success.

The final output of the Improvement Program is an Announcement Comment Draft Report produced by your CAB using all the information collected during the progress verifications. Please refer to the [‘Get Certified’](#) brochure for more details about the process for a full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard.



SUMMARY CHECKLIST

Here's a handy checklist to help you track your progress through the Improvement Program

Familiarise yourself with the MSC Fisheries Standard

- ☐ Familiarize yourself with MSC's performance indicators and assessment tree (see p.18 for a Guide to the MSC Fisheries Standard)
- ☐ Identify the gaps in performance your pre-assessment or full assessment report
- ☐ Understand the actions required to address these gaps

Prepare for the implementation of your Improvement Action Plan

- ☐ Verify that your pre-assessment or full assessment report is less than three years old
- ☐ Ensure that your Improvement Action Plan is developed collaboratively with all relevant stakeholders (e.g. fisheries, NGO and supply chain)
- ☐ Verify that everyone understands their role in the implementation of the action plan and that timelines are achievable
- ☐ Make sure that budget has been allocated, and funding sources have been identified, to support the implementation of the action plan

Prepare for entry verification

- ☐ Choose a CAB amongst MSC accredited CABs
- ☐ Sign a contract with your CAB
- ☐ Decide on the proposed Unit of Assessment with your CAB
- ☐ Think about Chain of Custody certification

Prepare for progress verifications

- ☐ Gather all the information that is used as evidence of progress
- ☐ Complete a progress verification report
- ☐ Update your Benchmarking and Tracking Tool based on the progress done
- ☐ If a site visit is scheduled, start preparing the logistics of the meetings

Prepare to transition to full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard

- ☐ Decide if you will proceed to full assessment with the same CAB that you used for the Improvement Program
- ☐ Get quotes from other CABs to make sure that you are getting the best value for money
- ☐ Read our '[Get Certified](#)' brochure to understand better what comes next

WHAT INFORMATION WILL A CAB OR A TECHNICAL CONSULTANT USE TO PRE-ASSESS YOUR FISHERY?

Stock assessment reports by scientific bodies such as regional scientific bodies (e.g. ICES or working groups of RFMOs), national bodies (e.g. IMARES – Netherlands, DFO – Canada, etc.) and / or local bodies for:

- Target species (the species that will be under MSC pre-assessment)
- Other retained species
- Discarded or slipped species

The most recent scientific advice, scientific surveys or research publications on biology and ecology for:

- Target species (the species that will be under MSC pre-assessment)
- Other retained species
- Discarded or slipped species
- Endangered, Threatened or Protected (ETP) species and birds, reptiles, amphibians and mammals
- Habitats
- Ecosystems

Logbook or landings data:

- Target species (the species that will be under MSC pre-assessment)
- Other retained species
- Discarded or slipped species
- Endangered, Threatened or Protected (ETP) species

Information on vessels/fishers pursuing the stock:

- Description of how the fishery under pre-assessment operates
- Description of fishing gears the client group or fishery under pre-assessment uses
- Any available catch or effort data from the client group or the fishery under pre-assessment
- Description of how all vessels or fishers pursuing the stock operate
- Description of fishing gears that all vessels or fishers pursuing the stock use
- Proportion of catch between all vessels or fishers pursuing the stock including the applicant fishery

Reports, maps and other documents:

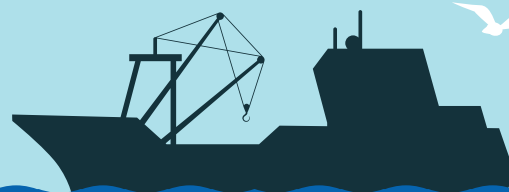
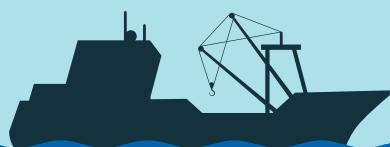
- Local, national and international regulations and laws (quotas, closed season, closed areas, technical measures etc.)
- Code(s) of conduct or other licence conditions
- Observer reports and video monitoring
- Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) or Automatic Identification System (AIS) maps or reports
- Any management plans, policy documents or information that affect the fishery at the national or regional level
- Management reviews and internal audits
- List of protected marine species in jurisdiction
- Habitat maps
- Inspection reports and details of infractions

Traceability (if relevant)

- Information on traceability at the fishery, to ensure that product is eligible to enter certified Chains of Custody



A GUIDE TO THE MSC FISHERIES STANDARD



Principle 1: Sustainable fish stocks

Stock status evaluation

- There is a sustainable population of a fishery's target catch or the population is rebuilding to a sustainable level

Harvest management strategy

- There is a precautionary harvest strategy in place for the fishery
- If the target species is a shark, shark finning is not taking place
- There are harvest control rules, that will keep the population at sustainable levels
- There is reliable information to inform the harvest strategy and the target catch is regularly monitored
- There is a robust assessment of the target catch population

Principle 2: Minimising environmental impact

What else does the fishery catch, and is it sustainable?

- There are sustainable populations of other species regularly caught
- There is a management strategy aimed at limiting impact on these species
- There is accurate information about these species

What else does the fishery catch? Does it catch any endangered, threatened or protected species, birds, reptiles, amphibians or mammals?

- There is no threat to populations of endangered, threatened or protected species or populations of any birds, mammals, reptiles or amphibians
- There is a management strategy to minimise impacts on these species
- There is accurate information about the fishery's impact on these species

Impact on habitats

- The fishery causes no serious or irreversible harm to habitats
- There is a strategy to minimise fishery impact on habitats
- There is accurate information on and the impacts of the fishing gear on habitats

Impact on the ecosystem

- The fishery causes no serious or irreversible harm to the ecosystem
- There is a management strategy to protect ecosystems
- There is reliable information on ecosystem function and impact

Principle 3: Fishery management

Governance and policy

- There is an effective legal or customary framework that supports achieving Principle 1, Principle 2 and recognises rights of people dependent on fishing for food or livelihood
- There is an effective consultation process with stakeholders
- There are long-term management objectives that are consistent with the MSC Fisheries Standard

Fishery specific management system

- There are clear fishery specific objectives for achieving Principle 1 and Principle 2
- There are effective decision-making processes
- There are compliance and enforcement systems
- There is performance evaluation of fishery management

THE MSC FISHERIES STANDARD

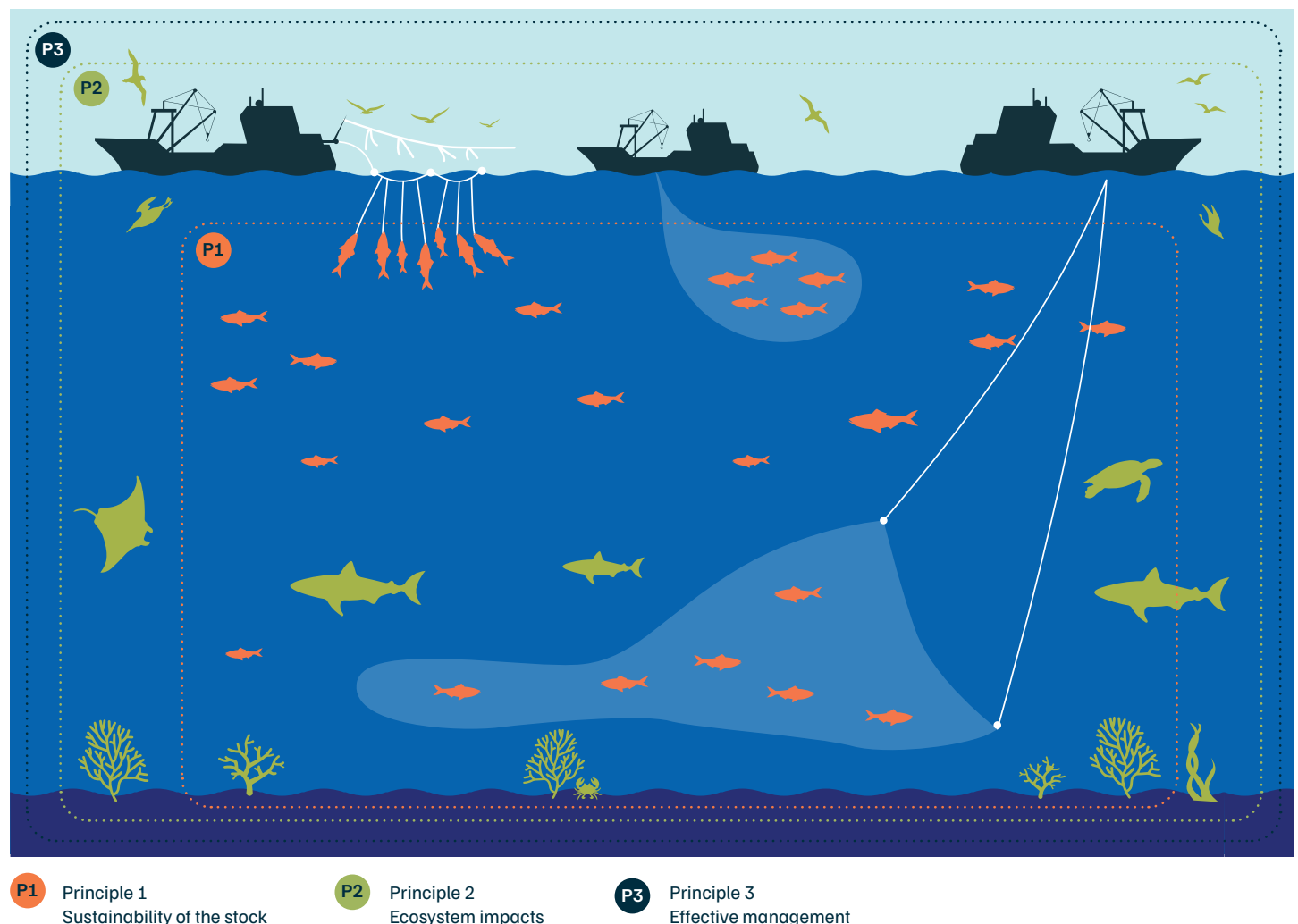
The MSC Fisheries Standard brings together over 25 years of collaboration with scientists, the fishing industry and conservation groups. It reflects internationally accepted fisheries science and best practice management.

The three principles of the MSC Fisheries Standard

Principle 1 Sustainability of the stock: Fisheries must operate in a way that allows fishing to continue indefinitely, without overexploiting the resource.

Principle 2 Ecosystem impacts: Fishing operations need to be managed to maintain the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem upon which the fishery depends, including other species and habitats.

Principle 3 Effective management: All fisheries need to meet all local, national and international laws and have an effective management system in place.



How does the scoring process work?

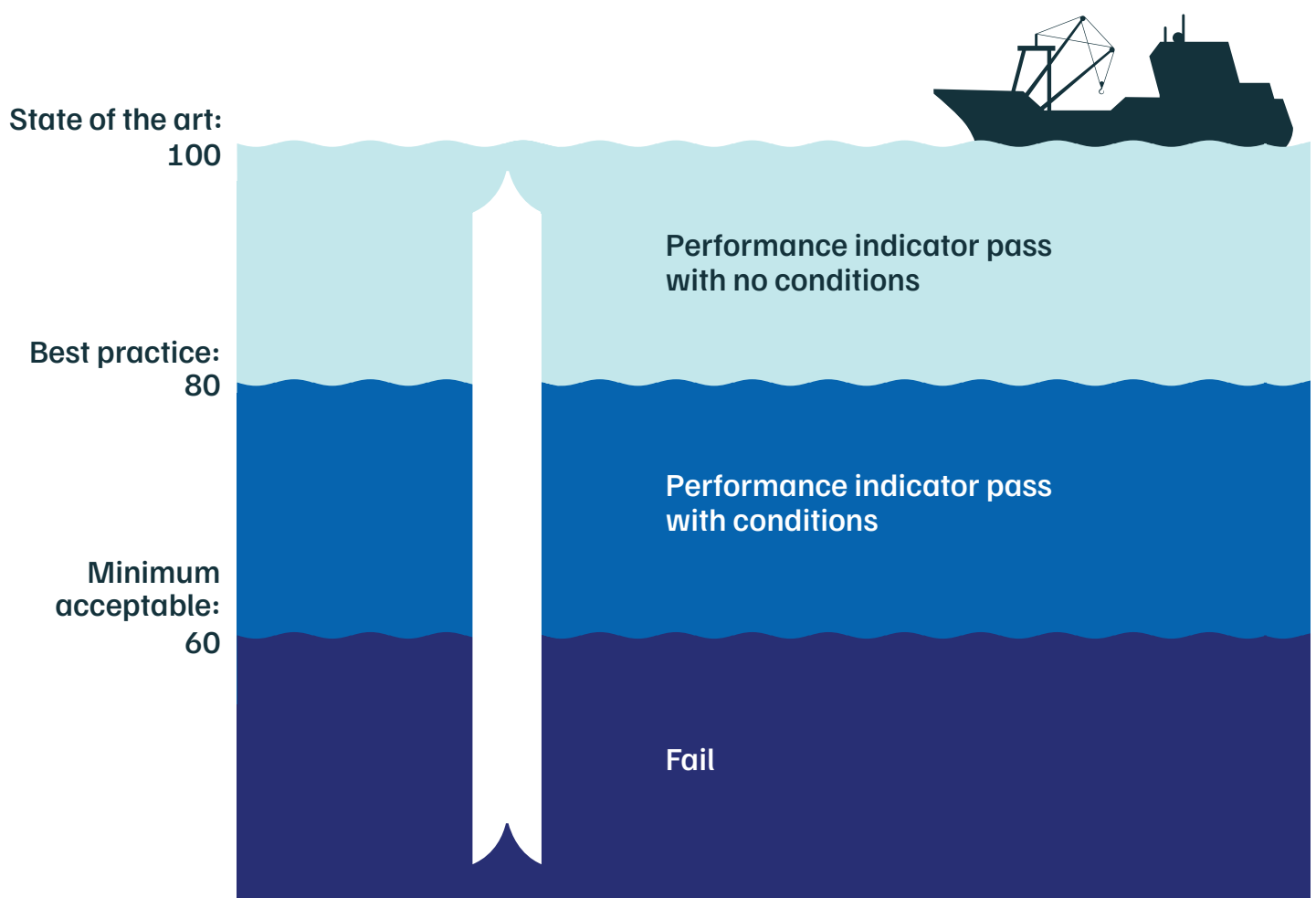
There are 25 performance indicators in the Fisheries Standard that sit under the three principles.

When your fishery undertakes a full assessment against the MSC Fisheries Standard at the end of your Improvement period, it 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.

To be certified, your fishery will have to score:

- at least 60 for each of the 25 performance indicators
- an average score of 80 across all performance indicators under each of the three principles.

Performance indicator scoring





Photos: MSC / MSC ReWild / stock_colors / Kotabaru Shrimp fishery © MSC
/ Small Pelagics Fishery in Sonora © MSC / Saigon Laca / South Africa Pole &
Line Albacore tuna fishery © MSC / © MSC Ernie Enkelaar

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All information correct at time of publication.
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Find out more:

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