SUSTAINABLE FISHING MEANS MORE

Report

An overview of the performance of MSC certified fisheries in New Zealand

8 June 2025

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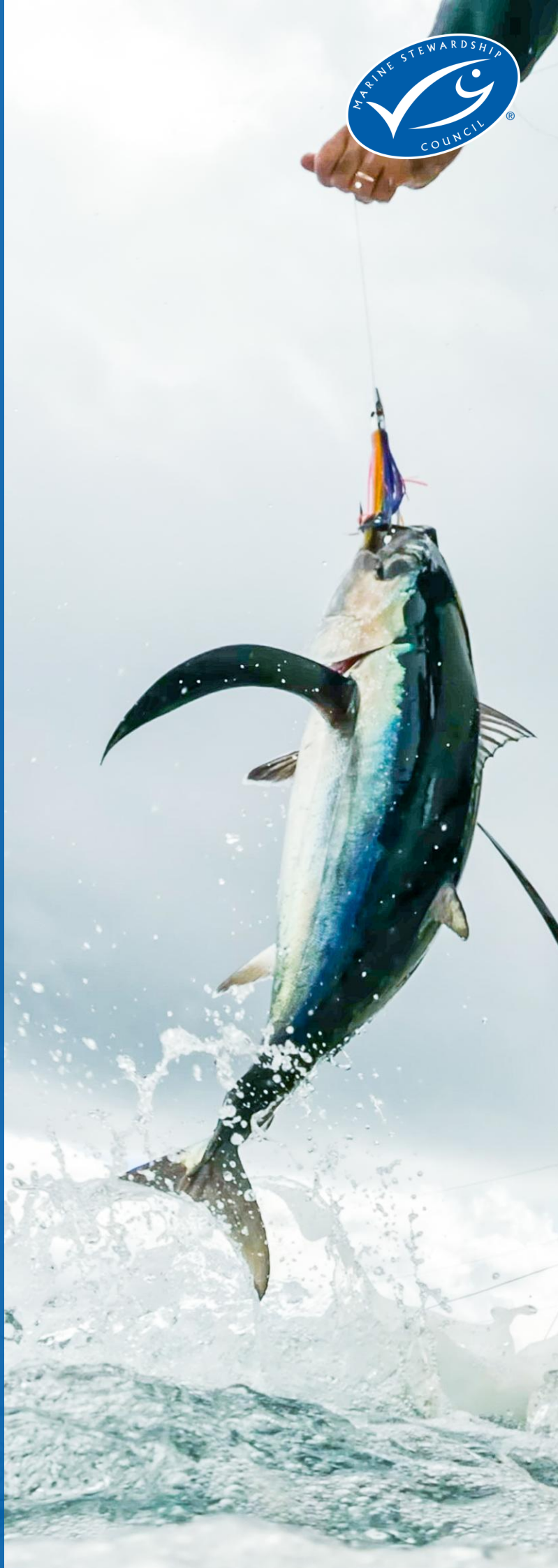


OVERVIEW AND BACKGROUND

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

New Zealand has long led the way in sustainable fishing, becoming one of the first countries to adopt the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) programme.

In 2001, the hoki fishery became the world's first whitefish fishery to achieve MSC certification, a landmark moment for both New Zealand and the MSC. It showed how a market-based approach could drive lasting improvements in fisheries management.

Nearly 25 years on, hoki remains MSC certified and is now joined by a growing number of other fisheries.

Today, 45% of New Zealand's total wild catch by volume is MSC certified, reflecting the industry's strong commitment to sustainability.

With particularly high uptake in deepwater fisheries, New Zealand has earned a global reputation for leadership in sustainable seafood. Ongoing collaboration and engagement have underpinned continuous improvements, delivering real benefits for the environment, the industry and consumers.

This report highlights key stories of progress and the partnerships that have driven change. It lays the foundation for a new era of sustainable fishing in New Zealand.

4 MSC certified fisheries

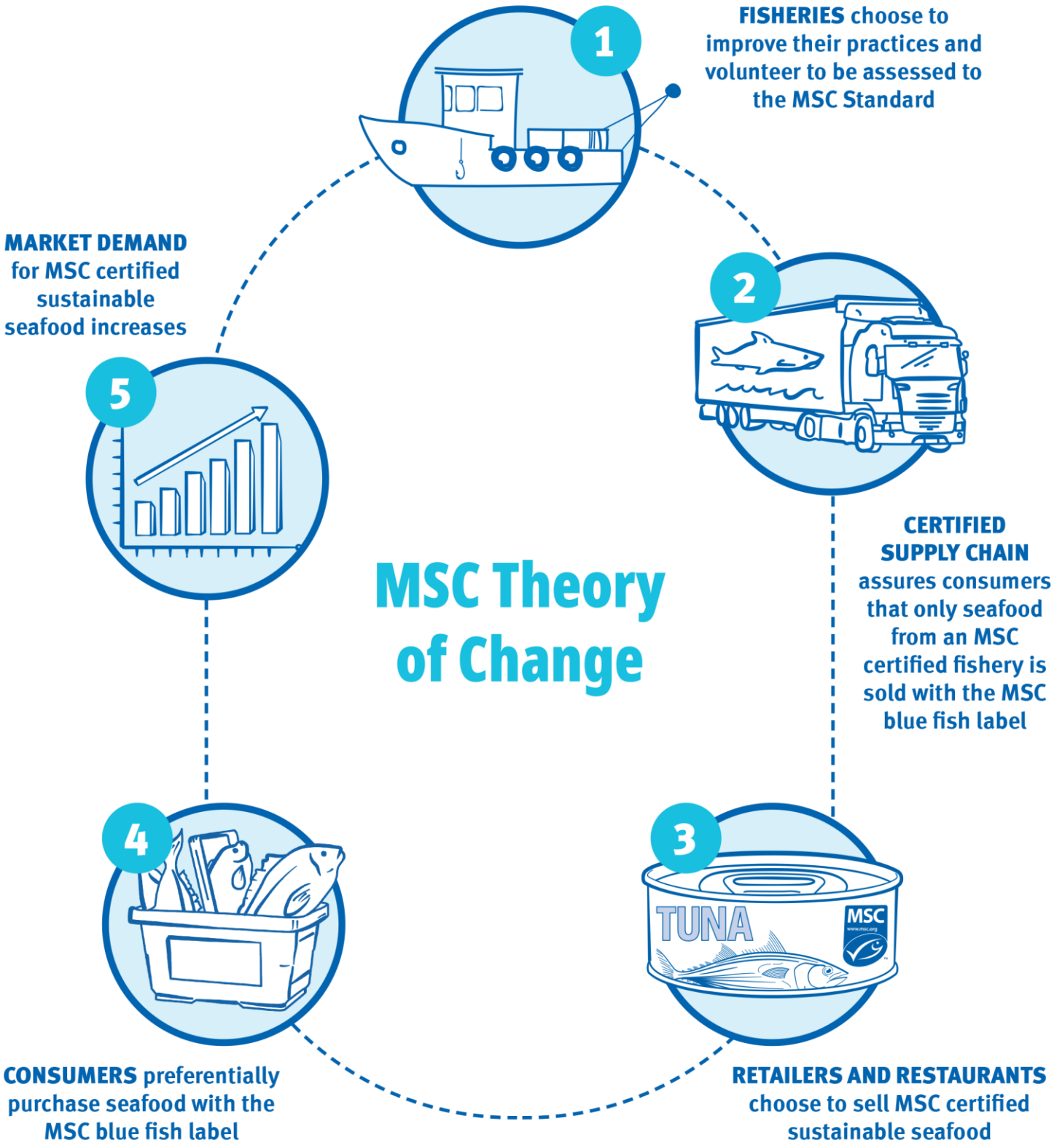
Catching **7** species

Accounting for **45%** of wild capture landings

Recording **46** improvements

Supported by **297** stakeholder comments

THE MSC THEORY OF CHANGE



THE ROLE OF THE MSC

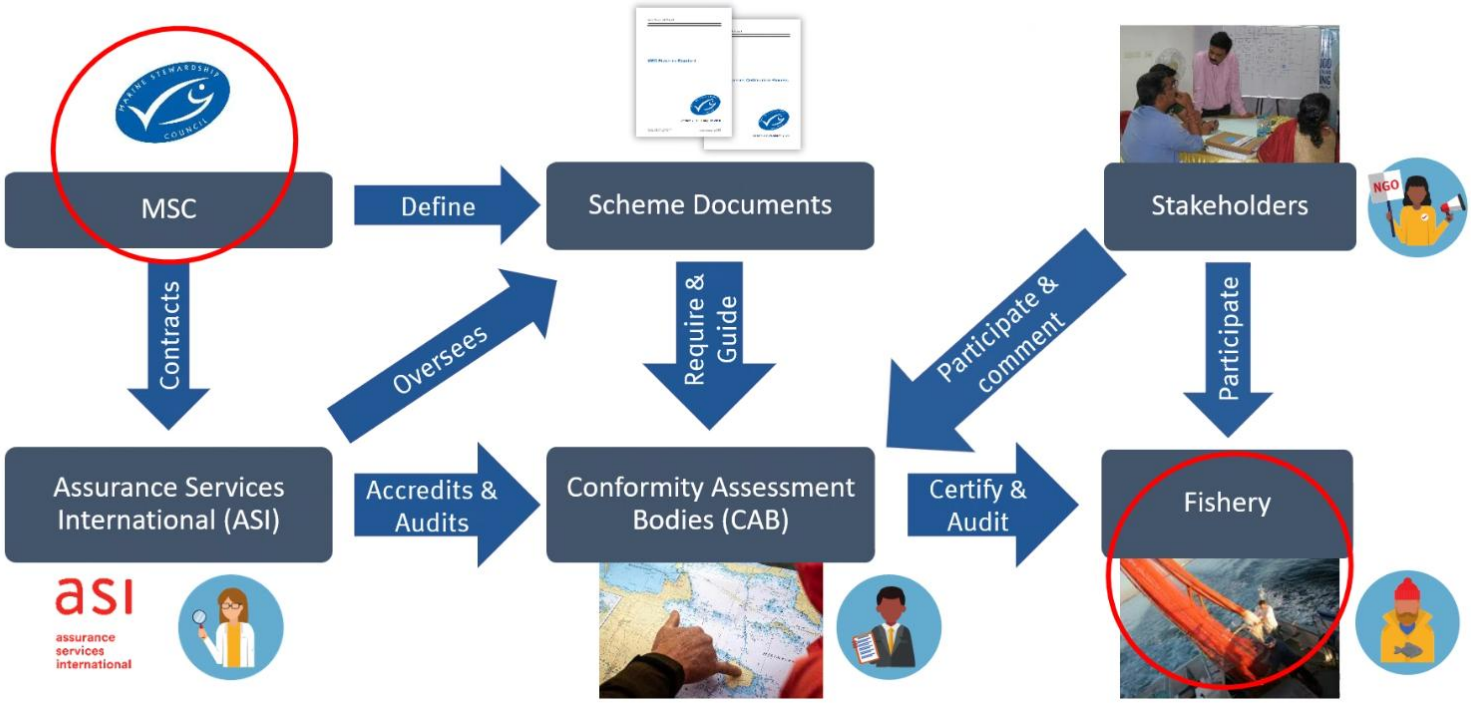
The MSC sets the global benchmark for sustainable fishing but does not assess fisheries itself.

Assessments are conducted by independent, third-party conformity assessment bodies (CABs), accredited and monitored by Assurance Services International (ASI).

This structure ensures MSC's independence and impartiality. The MSC controls the certification scheme by developing and maintaining the MSC Fisheries Standard and associated documents, which set out the requirements for fisheries and procedures for assessments.

To safeguard credibility, ASI oversees CABs through office reviews, shadow audits, and field surveillance.

This assurance system ensures assessments are consistent, science-based, transparent, and free from conflicts of interest.



THE MSC THREE PRINCIPLES

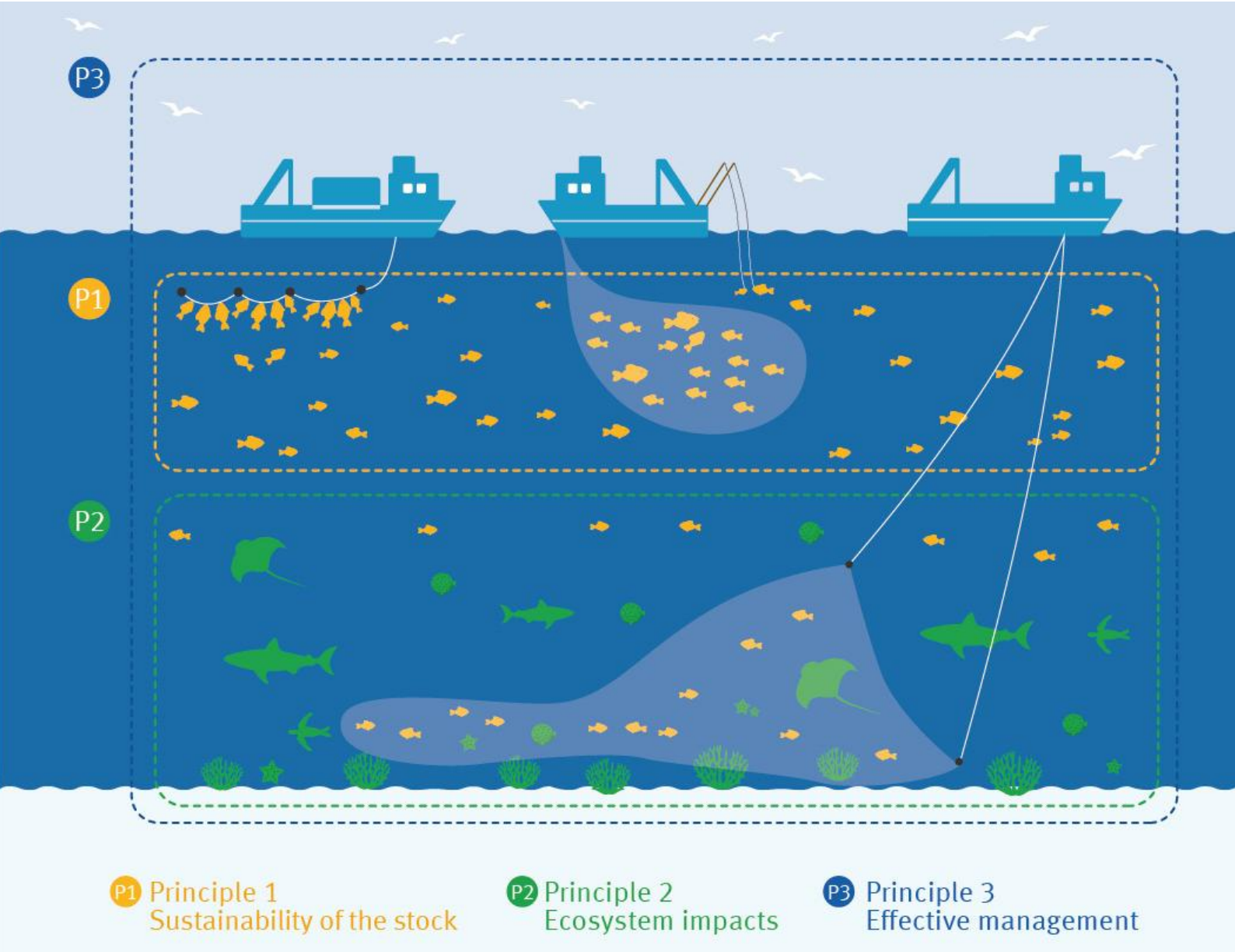
The MSC Fisheries Standard is based on three principles.

Principle 1 ensures fish stocks are healthy and sustainably harvested.

Principle 2 requires minimal environmental impact, protecting ecosystems and non-target species.

Principle 3 focuses on strong, transparent management and legal compliance.

These principles form a science-based framework for assessing sustainable fishing.



NEW ZEALAND'S LASTING MSC LEGACY

Since 2001, the MSC has actively recognised and rewarded sustainable fishing in New Zealand, beginning with the certification of the hoki fishery.

Over the past 25 years, MSC certified fisheries have delivered 46 improvements, from reducing bycatch to implementing more effective harvest strategies.

Each improvement plays a critical role in protecting ocean health, securing livelihoods for thousands of fishers, and ensuring consumers worldwide have access to sustainable seafood.

The MSC programme drives these changes by aligning fisheries with global best practice and fostering continual improvement through its Theory of Change.

Stakeholders play a vital role in strengthening the credibility of the MSC's Theory of Change. In total, they have contributed 297 comments across four certified New Zealand fisheries and one withdrawn fishery (skipjack tuna). Their input helps shape assessments and influence outcomes, making stakeholder participation a cornerstone of the programme.

While stakeholder feedback spans all three MSC Principles, non-governmental organisations focus more heavily on ecosystem indicators.

Topics such as bycatch, interactions with endangered species, and habitat impacts dominate their concerns. This level of scrutiny highlights how stakeholder engagement helps encourage fisheries towards stronger environmental performance.

Ongoing collaboration not only raises the bar for certified fisheries but also helps ensure they meet evolving market and societal expectations of what it means to be truly sustainable.

MAP OF MSC CERTIFIED FISHERIES

FISHERY PERFORMANCE OVER TIME

SCORES AND CONDITIONS

Each performance indicator within the MSC's three principles is scored to 100:

80 or above: Meets the MSC requirement

60–79: Needs improvement, a condition is applied

Below 60: Fails the requirement, certification cannot be granted

A condition where an improvement is required.

If a fishery scores between 60 and 79, it must address that area by a set deadline (usually within 5 years) and reach a score of at least 80.

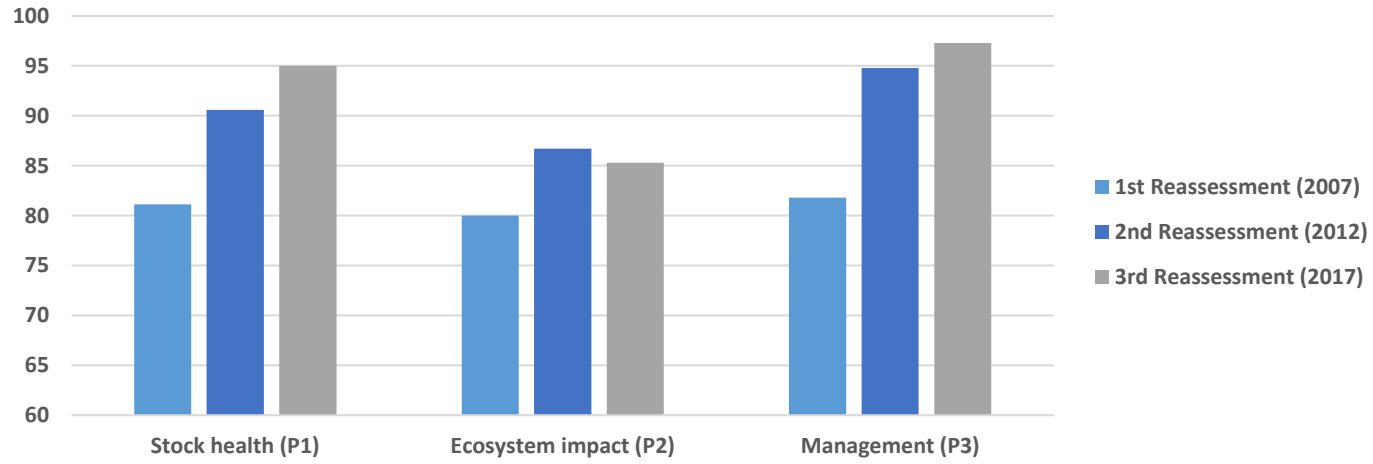
Conditions are specific, measurable, and progress is audited annually.

IMPROVING HIGH PERFORMANCE

The MSC expects certified fisheries to continually align with best practice in fisheries management. To ensure this, each fishery must undergo an independent reassessment every five years against the MSC Fisheries Standard.

This process provides a formal opportunity to evaluate any improvements in performance across the Standard's three core principles: stock health, ecosystem impacts, and effective management.

New Zealand hoki scores:
Initial assessment vs. 1st and 2nd Reassessment



New Zealand hoki, first certified in 2001, has completed four reassessments.

The three most recent in 2007, 2012 and 2017 show a clear improvement in performance, particularly in target stock status and management.

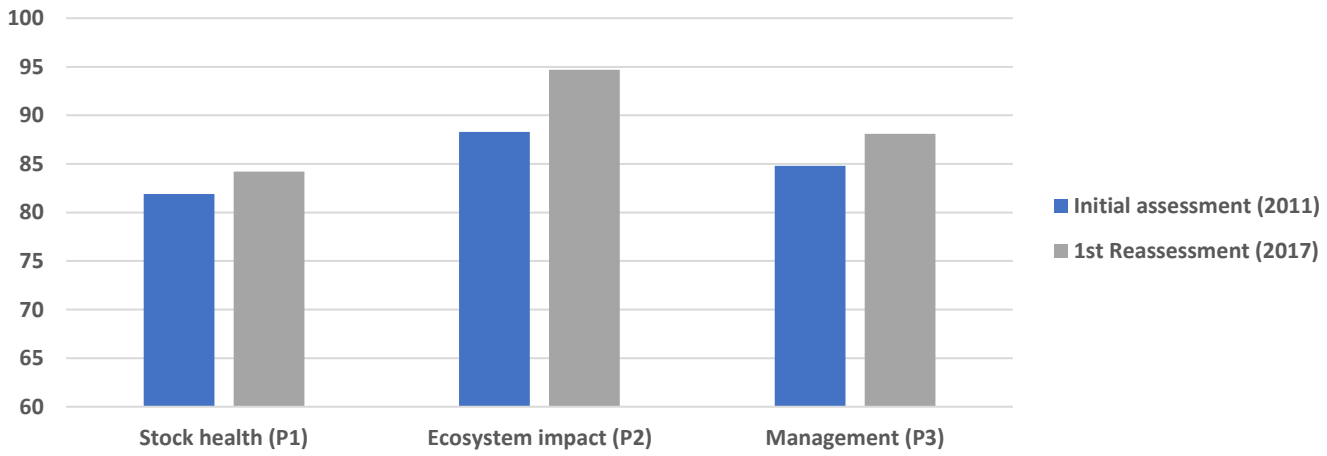
Ecosystem scores have remained stable, reflecting ongoing challenges common to trawl fisheries such as bycatch, interactions with endangered species, and habitat impacts.

IMPROVING HIGH PERFORMANCE

New Zealand's albacore troll fishery also shows improvements in performance against the MSC Fisheries Standard between its initial assessment and reassessment.

Given the transboundary nature of the South Pacific albacore stock, there are modest gains in stock health and effective management. In contrast, ecosystem outcomes, which are more directly influenced by this fishery, show significant improvement over the five-year period.

New Zealand albacore tuna troll scores: Initial assessment vs. 1st Reassessment



STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT

The MSC integrates stakeholder input at every stage of its programme to ensure transparency, credibility, and continuous improvement.

Key elements include:

Public consultations: Before major changes to the Fisheries Standard or policies, the MSC runs public consultations where stakeholders such as scientists, NGOs, industry, and governments can provide feedback.

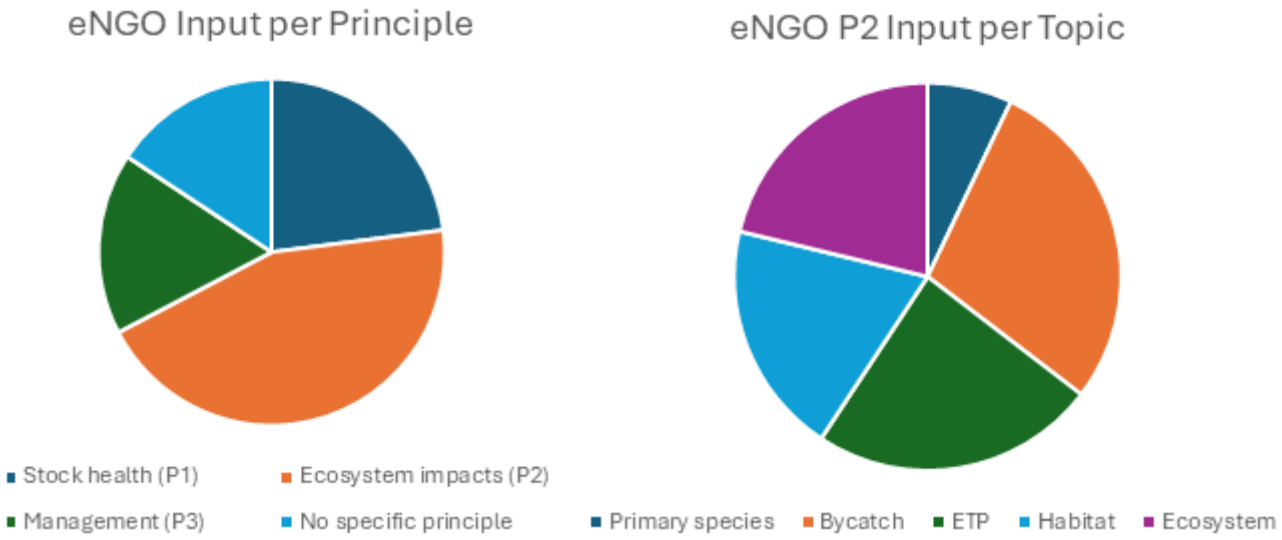
Stakeholder submissions during assessments: During fishery assessments, stakeholders can submit evidence, raise objections, or comment on draft reports. This helps inform the independent certifiers' decisions.

Objections procedure: A formal process allows stakeholders to challenge assessment outcomes if they believe MSC requirements were not properly applied.

Advisory bodies: Technical and stakeholder advisory councils contribute ongoing expertise and sectoral insight into MSC governance and standard-setting.

This multi-level process ensures the MSC reflects best science and diverse perspectives while maintaining independence and rigour.

STAKEHOLDER INPUT



An important part of the certification process is the opportunity for stakeholders to input at critical stages of a fishery's assessment. **Stakeholder input** helps ensure that the high bar for sustainability is credible, transparent, and subject to the rigour of external input.

If a stakeholder brings forward credible information, scoring outcomes could be amended which can potentially influence the certification outcomes.

With close to **300 stakeholder comments** representing the interests of 20 stakeholder groups across New Zealand's MSC fishery assessments, stakeholder participation continues to be a fundamental strength of the MSC programme.

242 of those stakeholder comments were from **environmental NGO's** (eNGO's). With their general focus on fishery performance against ecosystem indicators, eNGO's often look to represent community concerns when engaging in MSC assessments.

Focus issues for NZ stakeholders across MSC's Principle Two ecosystem requirements included how bycatch was being addressed (28%), fishery interactions with marine habitats (20%) as well as how endangered species were assessed against MSC's framework (24%).

CASE STUDY: NEW ZEALAND HOKI FISHERY

HOKI

The New Zealand hoki fishery, one of the world's largest whitefish fisheries, is a global leader in sustainable fishing.

First MSC certified in 2001, it became the world's first whitefish fishery to achieve this recognition and has since maintained certification through regular reassessments.

Comprising two stocks, one off the west coast of the South Island and another spread around New Zealand's Exclusive Economic Zone, the fishery uses mid-water and bottom trawling methods.

It is strictly managed under New Zealand's Quota Management System, with science-based catch limits and industry-led innovation playing key roles.

HOKI

Sustainability measures include real-time catch reporting, exclusion zones to protect spawning areas, and efforts to reduce bycatch, particularly of seabirds and marine mammals.

Collaboration between government, scientists, and industry stakeholders has been crucial to the fishery's long-term success.

The hoki fishery has demonstrated that large-scale commercial operations can align with conservation goals. It supplies major global markets with certified sustainable seafood and contributes significantly to New Zealand's economy.

This fishery exemplifies how rigorous management, stakeholder collaboration, and a commitment to continuous improvement can ensure the long-term health of marine ecosystems and the viability of seafood industries.

"At Seafood NZ, our dedication to fisheries management and sustainable fishing practices is reflected in our 25-year committed relationship with the MSC.

The MSC certification of our fisheries such as the New Zealand hoki fishery, helps us to communicate to customers that the fish they are purchasing not only aligns with global business demands and consumer expectations for transparent and responsible sourcing, but also that the fishery has been rigorously assessed against a set of the most robust science-based global best practice fisheries standards in the world, and has met or exceeded them."

Lisa Futschek – Chief Executive, Seafood New Zealand

CASE STUDY: NEW ZEALAND ORANGE ROUGHY FISHERY

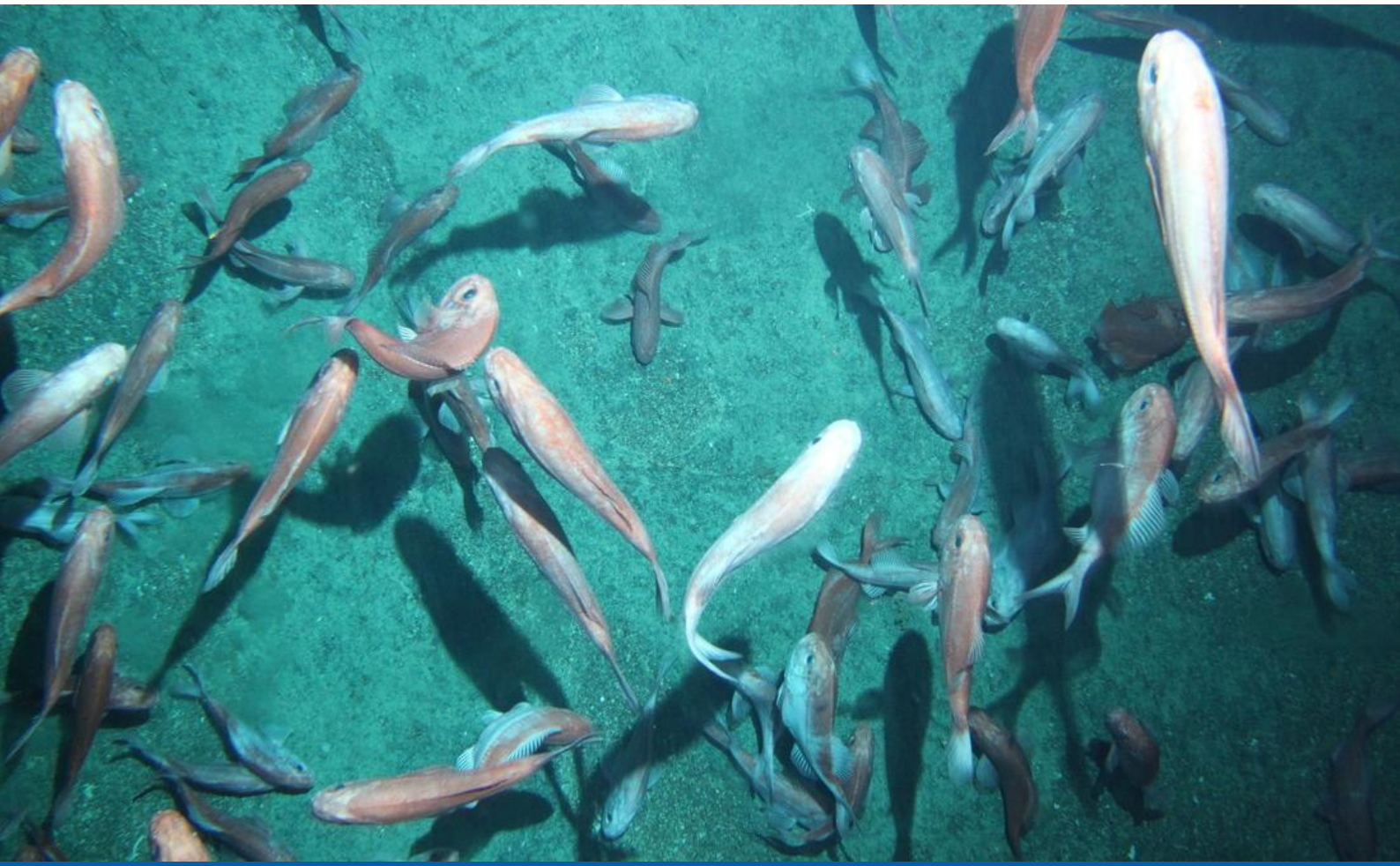
ORANGE ROUGHY

The New Zealand orange roughy fishery, particularly in the 3B East & South Chatham Rise region, targets a deepwater species known for its longevity and late maturity.

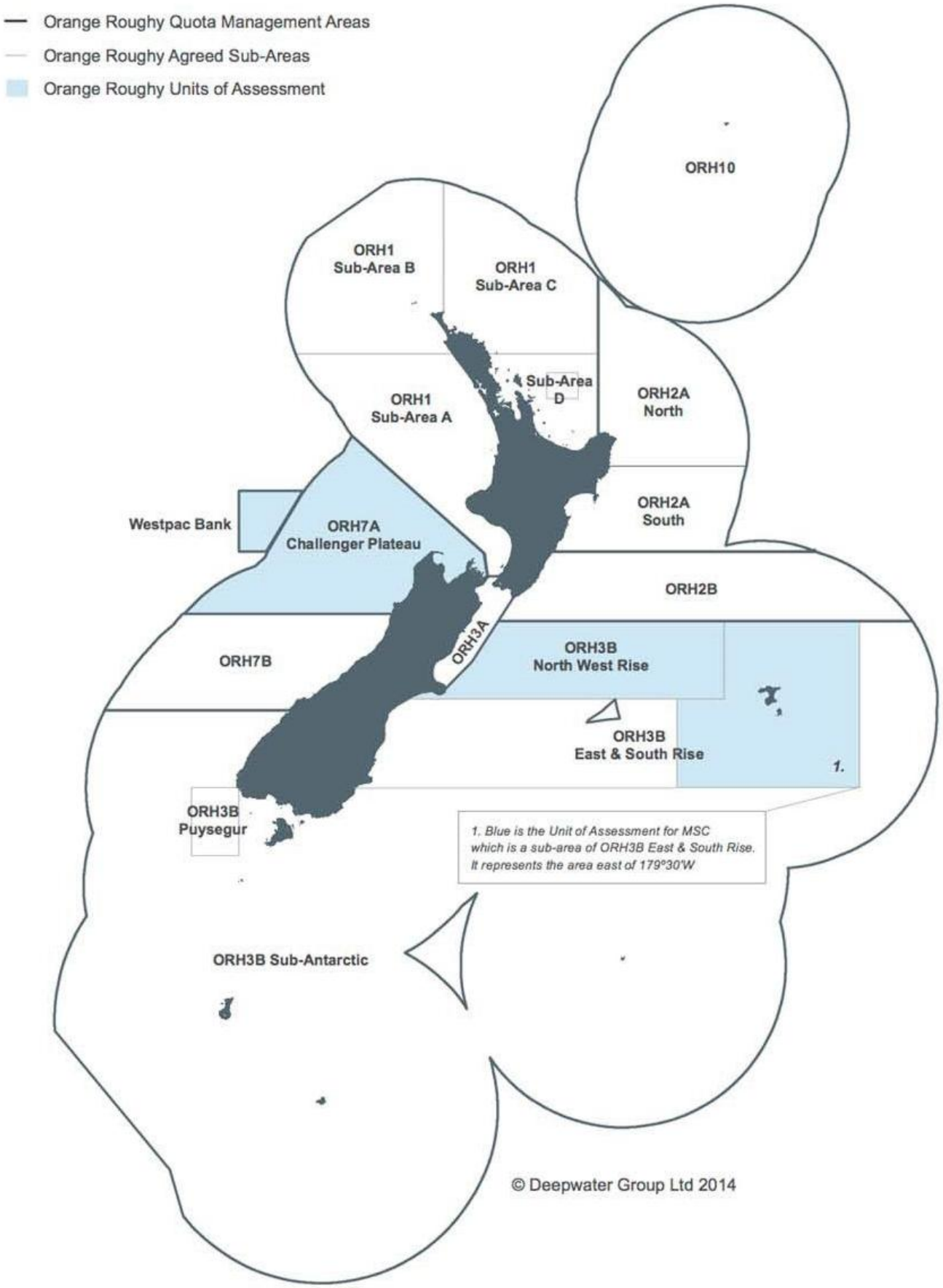
Effective management of this fishery necessitates precise Harvest Control Rules that adjust catch limits in response to stock assessments, ensuring the species' sustainability.

In 2024, the Deepwater Council received a £49,885 grant from the MSC Transition Assistance Fund to enhance the fishery's management strategies.

This two-year project focuses on developing an age-structured production model that incorporates comprehensive data on the age and size composition of the orange roughy stock, spanning from the 1990s to the 2010s.



ORANGE ROUGHY



ORANGE ROUGHY

By integrating this historical data with biomass estimates from acoustic surveys, the project aims to create robust operating models to inform responsive harvest control rules.

These models will undergo simulation testing to ensure they effectively guide total allowable catch decisions based on the most recent survey results and stock maturity patterns.

The fishery has been part of the In-Transition to MSC programme since 2023, demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement.

The current project is a critical step toward achieving MSC certification by late October 2028, reflecting the collaborative efforts of scientists, policymakers, and industry stakeholders in promoting sustainable fishing practices.

CASE STUDY: NEW ZEALAND ALBACORE TUNA TROLL FISHERY

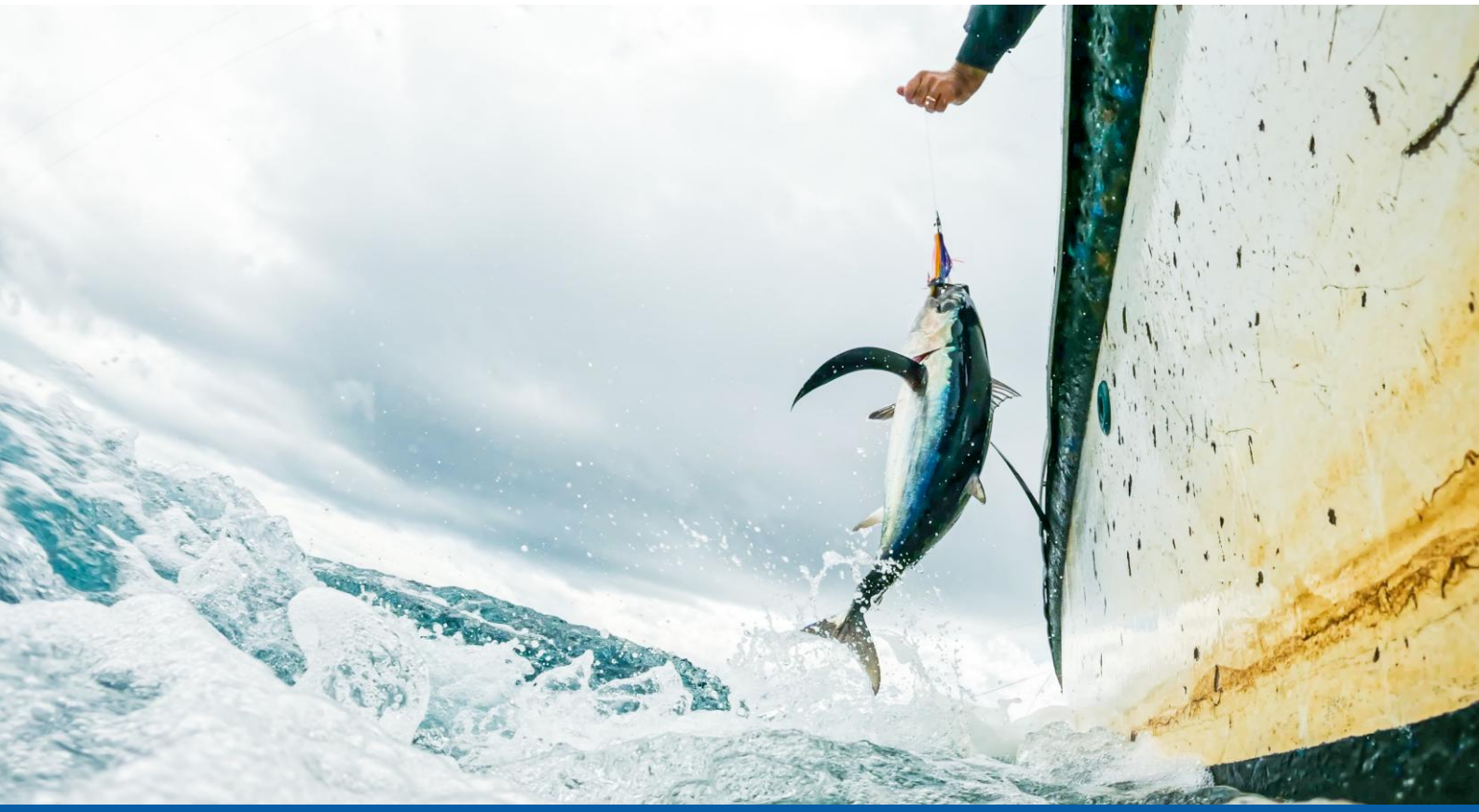
ALBACORE TUNA

New Zealand's albacore tuna troll fishery is a small-scale, highly selective operation that plays a vital role in supporting coastal communities while maintaining a low environmental impact.

Trolling involves towing a series of barbless lures behind small, independently owned vessels, typically between 40 and 70 feet, targeting juvenile albacore as they migrate down the west coast of the North and South Islands from December to May.

The fishery contributes just 1–2% of the overall South Pacific albacore catch but is recognised internationally for its sustainability, holding MSC certification since 2016.

This certification is essential for market access and reflects the fishery's commitment to responsible practices. Bycatch is minimal, and fuel use is relatively low, further reducing environmental impact.



ALBACORE TUNA

The Tuna Management Association, led by Doug Saunders-Loder, acts as a conduit between fishers, government, and international regulators, ensuring the fishery meets high sustainability standards.

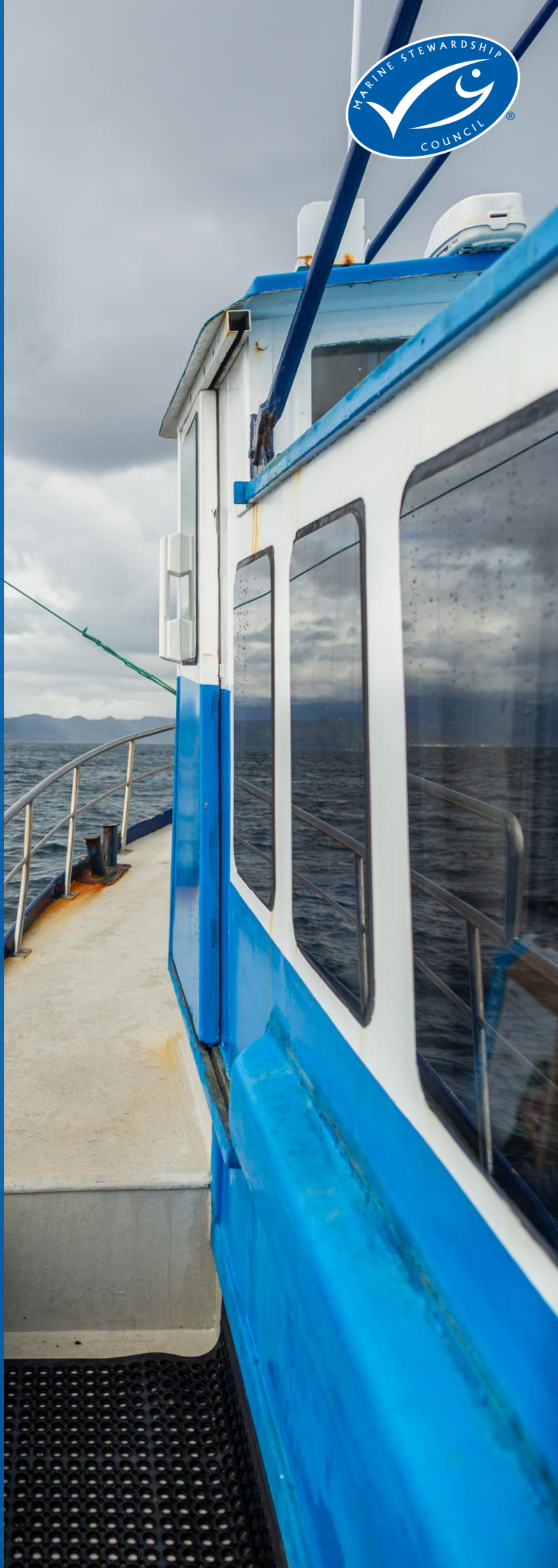
Environmental monitoring, conducted in collaboration with research institutes like NIWA and SPC, includes genetic sampling to better understand albacore migration and stock structure.

Deeply rooted in community and culture, this fishery reflects New Zealand's broader commitment to ocean stewardship, upholding Tangaroa, the god of the sea, and preserving resources for future generations.

"A tiny tissue sample taken here could match with a parent fish thousands of kilometres away—that's what helps us manage the species better."

Michael Driscoll, NIWA

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE



LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Since 2001, the MSC programme has proven its value in driving credible, lasting change across New Zealand fisheries. With 45% of the country's wild catch now MSC certified, the programme continues to deliver benefits for both ocean health and seafood consumers.

Looking ahead to 2030, we anticipate more New Zealand fisheries aligning with the latest MSC Fisheries Standard.

We also encourage fisheries that see market opportunity in certification to take the steps needed to demonstrate their sustainability against global best practice.

The MSC is a valuable tool for both large offshore operations and smaller nearshore fisheries. For inshore sectors, certification can support improved management, stronger socio-economic performance, and more secure access to resources.

IMAGE CREDITS

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protect our
ocean through
sustainable
choices