

Our Objection To MSC Certification Of Canadian Longline Swordfish

Fishery Description

The North West Atlantic Canada longline swordfish fishery is a pelagic longline fishery for swordfish and tunas located in Nova Scotia. Over 90% of the total catch of approximately 1200 tons of swordfish per year is sold in the United States. The fishery was recommended for certification under the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) standard in September 2011, after beginning assessment in March 2009. The MSC is one of the world's most popular certification and ecolabelling program for seafood. With the certification of this fishery, conservation organizations around the world are concerned that MSC's rush to expand its product line is leading to the certification of unsustainable fisheries. Assessments are carried out by third-party companies, but it is the MSC brand and logo that appears on product labels.

Pelagic longlines are non-selective, passive gear types. A mainline is rolled out from the boat with between 500-1500 baited hooks hanging off of it. This incredible long line of hooks with food on them attracts all sorts of animals - more than just what the fishers are aiming for. The Canadian longline swordfish fishery catches approximately 100,000 sharks and 1,400 sea turtles each year while landing 20,000 swordfish.

Why we are objecting

The Ecology Action Centre (EAC) and David Suzuki Foundation (DSF) have been engaged in fishery reform and advocated for the use of alternative gear to pelagic longlines in the Atlantic Canadian Swordfish fishery for over a decade. We have opposed the certification of this fishery as stakeholders since 2009, and are formally objecting to numerous scoring issues in the final report.

1. The certification is based on promises and management measures that are not yet in place

Imagine paying more for produce that was called organic because the farm was planning to stop using pesticides in the next four years. This fishery has a 'plan' to protect sharks, protect sea turtles, and support scientific research – it is not happening yet.

2. The fishery is not required to reduce its bycatch of sharks and sea turtles

Over 50% of the catch by weight in this fishery is discarded injured or dead. Of these discarded animals, 90% by weight are species considered at risk including loggerhead and leatherback turtles, blue, shortfin mako, and porbeagle sharks. The fishery has five years to show that it isn't hurting population of these animals, but shouldn't they do that before being rewarded?

3. The fishery hides behind poor data and scientific uncertainty

This fishery has a low level of observer coverage (5%) that is not deployed using a statistically meaningful plan. The incompleteness of information is used to postpone conservation and management measures in the fishery, contrary to the precautionary approach supported by the MSC.

4. The fishery is taking advantage of loopholes in the MSC Standard

Pelagic longlining is one of the leading causes for the global decline of shark and sea turtle populations. For the MSC to stay credible it must make sure that its standard isn't so loose that a fishery like this can pass. It is the MSC's responsibility to make sure that its standard is rigorous– and to fix it when fisheries try to slip through the cracks!

Even the official Peer Reviewer of the report warned that, if problems in the certification weren't addressed, "the MSC may find itself presiding over further decline of the North Atlantic loggerhead in the name of sustainability."

What we are asking

Consumers and environmental organizations have placed a great deal of faith in the Marine Stewardship Council's standard. This process has shown that it is possible for an Assessment Team to interpret guidelines broadly enough to result in the potential certification of an unsustainable fishery. Consumers who see the MSC logo on products do not expect to 'purchase' a 5:1 ratio of sharks caught to the target swordfish.

We are asking retailers not to purchase longline swordfish from Atlantic Canada, even if it does receive MSC certification. We are further asking them remind the MSC – either internally or in public – that the strength of the MSC brand relies on consumer faith in its process. If consumers cannot trust the logo to distinguish sustainable seafood products, all our efforts to promote sustainable seafood consumption and improve supply chain sustainability will be undermined.

For more information on this fishery and alternatives to the longline gear type please contact:

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