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The Marine Stewardship Council Certification Scheme:

A Case Study *for Learning in Support of* Developing Voluntary Principles *of* Good Practice *in* Food Marketing to Children

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CONTENTS

		Page No
I.	Introduction	1
II.	The Development Process	3
III.	The Adoption Process	6
IV.	MSC in Practice Today	7
V.	Using Principles and Operational Criteria to Underpin Goals	9
VI.	Assessing Impact of the MSC Certification Scheme	10
References / Bibliography		12
Glossary		14
Annex		15

List of Figures

Figure 1: Marine Stewardship Council Logo™ 1
Figure 2: Adoption Timeline 6
Figure 3: Flowchart of Main Steps in Fishery Assessment Process 8

I. Introduction

A case study of the Marine Stewardship Council development of principles and criteria for sustainable fisheries certification scheme has been prepared to inform the development of responsible and accountable practices in food marketing that children are targeted or substantially exposed to.

The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is the world's most widely accepted scheme for sustainability and traceability certification of wild-caught seafood. Its aim is to promote sustainable fishing practices by linking these to consumer markets and marketing.

Figure 1: Marine Stewardship Council Logo™

The scheme has become an established presence in the supply chain. Currently, eight percent of the world's edible wild caught fish is engaged in the scheme, including 40% of the global prime whitefish catch (MRAG 2010).

The scheme has not established a strong consumer market presence. The MSC offers anecdotal evidence that some fisheries have been able to access new markets and achieve better prices for their produce as a result of certification (MSC 2009). However, most analysts find continued price volatility, the MSC message to consumers to be undermined by the wide range of eco-labels and recommendation lists applied to seafood, and that recognition of the brand is low (MRAG 2010).

MSC started in 1996/7 as a collaboration between Unilever (at that time, a major player in the global seafood industry), and the environmental campaigning organisation, the World Wildlife Fund (WWF). The aim was to develop a third-party certification body to support the management of global fisheries stocks by influencing markets and fisheries activities.

In its early years of operation the biggest challenges to its establishment and sustainability were the tension between commercial and conservation priorities, and the low number of certified fisheries. In recent years, more fisheries are being assessed and accredited and there are now thousands of MSC certified products on supermarket shelves and in the food-service supply chain. Supply chain buyer behaviour and a robust approach by the MSC to consensus building and transparency with a very wide range of stakeholders have been key to this growth.

As the scheme has matured, contemporary operational and long term viability challenges for the MSC certification scheme are a continued lack of financial benefit to participating operators; barriers to access of the scheme for smaller and less well resourced operators (especially those in developing countries - in 2008 only 2 of the total of 22 certified fisheries were in developing countries); maintaining quality assurance and clarity of goals whilst simultaneously remaining responsive to sector-specific technical issues (e.g. emerging and sometimes contested evidence on environmental impact); and improving consumer recognition, demand and price stability (Kaiser 2006).

The scheme was inspired by, and modelled on, the Forestry Stewardship Council (FSC). Analysis in the literature suggests the MSC and FSC face similar strategic challenges. Specifically, addressing the confusion created by a plethora of self-regulated and monitored alternate schemes, and maintaining scientific, objectively verifiable standards and indicators whilst remaining responsive to technical and environmental change and the emerging evidence base are necessary for the strengthening of brand identity, credibility and impact on markets and marketing activity.

A brief outline of the establishment, development and evaluation of impact and outcomes of the Marine Stewardship Council scheme, with details on process, challenges, resolution of those challenges, and impact to date is presented.

A provisional summary of learning that can inform the development of principles for good practice in food marketing and children is presented.

II. The Development Process

The background to the development of the MSC was concern over the state of many fish stocks. FAO reported 70% of the world's commercial marine stocks as either fully fished, over-exploited, depleted or only slowly recovering. Cod had disappeared from the Canadian East coast in 1992. The world catch of bottom dwelling fish was static and one-third of the world's catch was classified as incidental/unintended species catch. Fishermen from different countries were clashing over remaining stocks (Radler 2002).

Antony Burgmans, the director of Unilever's Frozen Food Business in Europe and WWF are credited with initiating and designing the strategy for a sustainable fishing certification scheme. In February 1996, a joint working party was set up to monitor fish stocks and fishing techniques. Michael Sutton, the director of WWF's Endangered Seas Campaign commented 'I believed that governments were not able to stop the over-fishing. Therefore we had to develop long-term solutions which were environmentally necessary. The next step was to create economic incentives in order to make them politically feasible' (Radler 2002). Both Sutton and Burgmans experienced opposition to the new approach within their organisations. Burgmans said transforming traditional adversaries into future partners who could work together on the basis of common objectives while having different motives was key to successful launch (Radler 2002).

The MSC was formally established in 1997. The vision was to develop a world-wide standard for sustainable fisheries against which fisheries could be assessed and certified. Products from compliant fisheries would be eligible to carry the MSC logo on their packaging. By selecting those products, consumers could demonstrate that they were assisting the resolution of the global fisheries crisis.

At the launch of MSC, Unilever committed to buying fish only from sustainable sources by 2005 (Ponte 2006).[1] However, an alliance between Unilever and WWF only represented a very small part of the global fisheries industry. For the scheme to work, the support of many other stakeholders was essential. Greenpeace withdrew their support, citing concerns over weak criteria (recovery plans and sustainability) and control of the organisation by big business. These concerns about the MSC were recently re-stated (Greenpeace 2009a).

The fishing industries of Norway, UK and the US were initially very hostile to the MSC, citing concerns over bureaucracy, cost and a lack of trust in those driving the process (Radler 2002). Opposition was also apparent from many other sources. Ponte (2006) describes criticism voiced by the International Collective in Support of Fishworkers, including accusations of bias in favour of industrial fisheries, lack of consultation with fishers, perceptions in developing countries that MSC and a lack of scientific knowledge on sustainability of fisheries would be a barrier to trade. Within Unilever and WWF, many remained unconvinced but others saw the initiative as an example of the way forward – promoting solutions that are positive for both business and the environment.

[1] Since then, Unilever has sold most of its fish related businesses - John West was bought in 1997 by Heinz and Birds Eye to Permira in 2006.

In the following years, there was an extensive consultation process. In 1999, both Unilever and WWF withdrew from management of the MSC and it became an independently run non-profit organisation (Ponte 2006).

In response to concerns that the governance structure of the MSC was not inclusive enough, a Technical Advisory Board was created in 2000. Membership mainly consists of fisheries scientists (see Annex for list of members) and provides advice on technical, scientific and quasi-judicial issues. A Stakeholder Council, which represents specific interests, was also set up (see Annex for list of members and affiliations).

A Stakeholder Council was also created in 2000. Its membership includes retailers, environmental groups, food processors, academics and other stakeholders. Its role is to provide advice, interpretation and recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

The Board of Trustees is the ultimate decision making authority, and is supported in this by the various sub-groups and the international Secretariat office (Cummins 2004).

In the early years, the MSC was mainly funded by grants from Unilever, WWF and other donors but had very few certified fisheries. It had to build critical mass from within a sceptical fisheries industry. Some critics suggested that the organisation has certified fisheries that are not truly sustainable to satisfy sponsors and ensure that the MSC project continued (Owens 2008)[2].

MSC was criticised for the lack of transparency in its scoring process. In response to this, in 2002, a requirement for fishery assessment reports to reveal scores and weightings was added (Owens 2008). Criticism of inconsistent scoring between certifiers led to the development of a Quality and Consistency Project under the Technical Advisory Board.

Guidance materials have been developed to support engagement in an inevitably complex and information-dense process of assessment and certification. These materials provide guidance on best practice in assessment and also critically guidance on good practice in consultation. Neither of these resources were originally envisaged as necessary, but are another example of how the scheme was responsive to the needs and circumstances of stakeholders, whilst maintaining clarity on science-based methodology, objectives and vision (Cummins 2004).

The MSC adjusted its assessment model after the development of FAO Guidelines for Eco-labelling of Fish and Fishery Products (FAO 2005). The MSC conducts regular audits to ensure that it continues to comply with these guidelines. More recently it has been conducting trials on a risk-based assessment model which would make it easier to assess 'data deficient' (usually developing country) fisheries (FAO 2009).

Owen (2008) suggests that the responsiveness to criticism and flexibility of the organisation has boosted the credibility of the MSC.

[2] In fact, MSC does not generate revenue directly from the certification of fisheries. It does receive revenue from the use of the MSC logo, at 0.05% on the wholesale price of fish from a certified fishery (FAO 2009).

Development and refinement of the MSC scheme continues to date. FAO (2009) has identified economic and governance priority areas for further development/refinement for seafood eco-labels as:

- Defining a workable and equitable system for the distribution of costs of certification, including considerations of public and private funding.
- Exploring the issue of market access and international trade funding.
- Developing strategies for transnational fisheries where 'ownership' is distributed.
- Benchmarking of eco-label schemes in light of international (FAO) Guidelines.

Furthermore, sustainability and resilience of the scheme and relationships is clearly critical but not yet fully resolved. A recent example illustrates how tenuous working relationships and financial sustainability may be: Alaskan salmon was the first fishery accredited by MSC. In 2009, the fishery owners (Alaska Department of Fish and Game) indicated it would not be renewing MSC accreditation, claiming their brand was strong enough and buyers had confidence that the fishery was being managed sustainably. As a large operator, and also the founding certified fishery of the MSC scheme their withdrawal could have had both a significant financial and symbolic negative impact. However, in February 2010 the Alaska Fisheries Development Foundation took over as the representative client, and continued certification (www.fishnewseu.com).

III. The Adoption Process

Figure 2: Adoption Timeline

1996	First discussions between WWF and Unilever
1999	MSC becomes an independent entity
2000	First fishery certified – Alaskan wild salmon
2008	22 fisheries certified
2009	42 fisheries certified
Feb 2010	63 fisheries certified, 131 under assessment and 40-50 in pre-assessment MSC certified fisheries = 4 million tonnes Under assessment = 3 million tonnes Product lines bearing MSC eco-label = 3,800 in 62 countries. Retail value US$1.5 billion

Sources: MSC (2010a) & MSC (2010b)

In March 2006 there were 332 MSC labelled products available in 25 countries and 50 fisheries either certified or undergoing certification. Wal-Mart Stores announced in 2006 that it had set a goal to procure all wild-caught seafood for North American stores from MSC certified fisheries within 3 to 5 years (Owens 2008). Other retailers, such as Sainsbury's and Marks and Spencer have committed to partial sourcing from MSC approved lines as part of their efforts to meet corporate environmental targets.

A 2009 Round Table meeting convened by the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) notes 'MSC's presence and credibility in the market was evidenced by the extent to which it was the scheme most often discussed at the Round Table'. At the same Round Table, discussions on French efforts to develop their own seafood eco-label noted 'as part of that process, it (*the French Government*) examined existing private eco-labels, including consistency with the FAO Guidelines for the Eco-labelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries'. The Round Table notes the conclusion that 'of the existing eco-labels, only MSC was fully compliant with those guidelines'. The Marine Stewardship Council therefore appears to be the most credible global seafood accreditation scheme by the fishing industry. Its accreditation process is also more expensive than other schemes[3].

According to the FAO Round Table (FAO 2009) the fishing industry is 'resigned to the existence of eco-labels' and increasingly sees certification as a 'cost of doing business' in international seafood markets. According to Steven Akester of MacAlister Elliott and Partners, one of the MSC Certification Bodies, MSC's rapid growth is because it is 'preaching to the converted'. Most fishing industries know that they need to do something about the sustainability of their business and this is the best model available. He also commented that there was very rarely any clearly attributable financial benefit to a fishing industry, partly because of prices fluctuations which over-ride any premium. The FAO Round Table (FAO 2009) similarly concurred: 'There is only spotty evidence of a price premium accruing to certified fish and seafood'.

[3] Friends of the Sea wild-caught sustainable certification for example costs €8,000 on average compared to €30,000 on average for MSC, see MRAG 2010.

IV. MSC in Practice Today

The certification process is divided into two processes; the certification of the fishery, and certification of the chain of custody. Certification is awarded to a fishery, not to individual operators, although individual operators can apply for chain of custody certification and for the use of the MSC logo.

The costs of certification are incurred by the fishery and are substantial - typically €10,000 to €100,000 (FAO 2009). MSC accreditation is usually therefore only sought for large fisheries. However schemes to assist with the costs have been developed in a few countries. The Dutch government for example, has provided €1.5 million to help all Dutch fisheries achieve MSC certification (Verburg, cited in FAO 2009). Other governments (France, Iceland) have created their own seafood eco-label schemes as an alternative to MSC (FAO 2009).

The process of certification is carried out by independent, third party Certification Bodies (CBs) deemed competent and capable by the MSC and the associated company, Accreditation Services International (ASI). ASI also inspect CBs for the Forest Stewardship Council. The three main UK-based CBs are Moody International, MacAlister Elliott & Partners and Food Certification International.

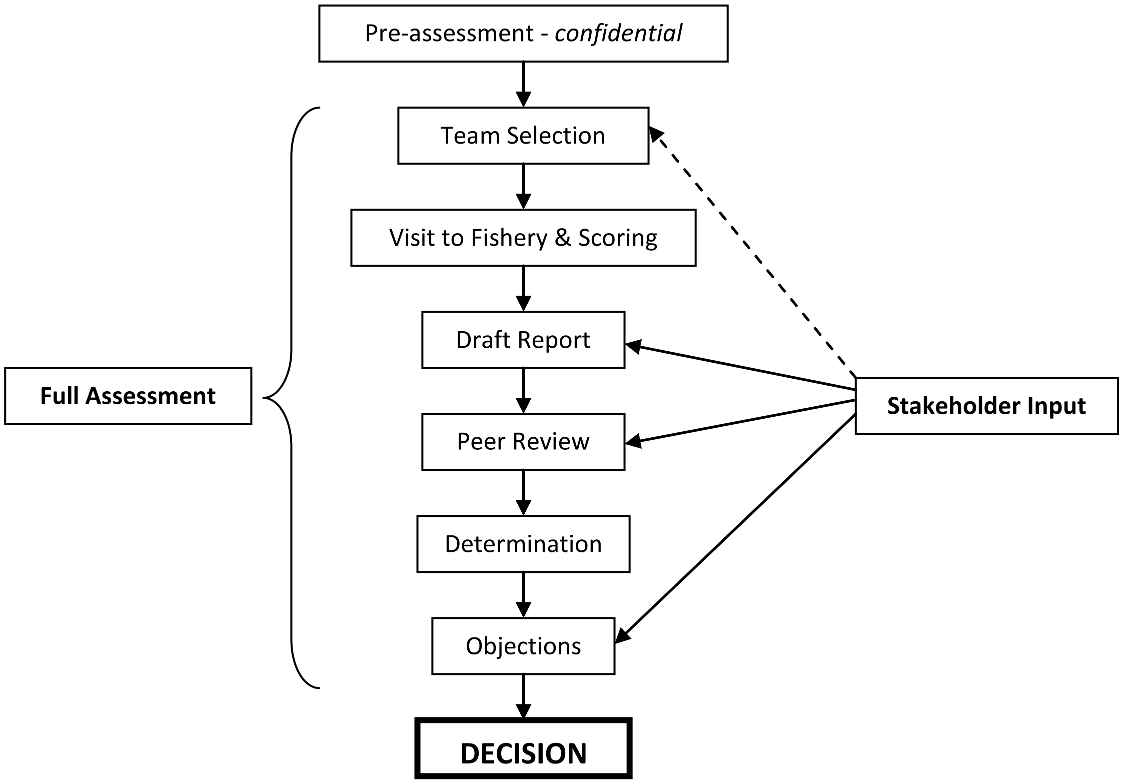
The first step for a fishery considering MSC accreditation is to select a CB to carry out a pre-assessment. This provides the client with a brief, provisional evaluation on whether the fishery will meet the standard. Gulbrandsen (2009) notes that up to half of potential applicants withdraw at this stage.

Confidentiality agreements mean that this information is not usually available. The confidential pre-assessment enables fisheries to conduct a pre-feasibility assessment without risking commercial reputation. It also means that they can act on the recommendations of the pre-assessment and return to the process at a later date. Only one fishery has been failed after passing the pre-assessment (Owens 2008).

After pre-assessment, the fisheries client undergoes a full assessment by a CB, including peer review of the CB’s findings by other fisheries scientists. Once a fishery has entered the assessment phase, a public announcement by MSC and a call from the CB for interested parties to contact them is required.

A final report provides an assessment of the fishery against the MSC standard. Once certification has been granted, the chain of custody must be assessed before the MSC logo can be used. The entire process averages around 12-14 months (range 5-48 months).

Figure 3: Flowchart of Main Steps in Fishery Assessment Process
Adapted from Cummins (2004)



V. Using Principles and Operational Criteria to Underpin Goals

The three primary MSC Principles are:

1. A fishery must be conducted in a manner that does not lead to over-fishing or depletion of the exploited populations. For those populations that are already depleted, the fishery must be conducted in a manner that demonstrably leads to their recovery.
2. Fishing operations should allow for the maintenance of the structure, productivity, function and diversity of the ecosystem (including habitat and associated dependent and ecologically related species) on which the fishery depends.
3. The fishery is subject to an effective management system that respects local, national and international institutional and operational frameworks that require use of the resource to be responsible and sustainable.

Each *principle* has an associated statement of intent and a set of criteria that expand purpose and scope. For example, the *intention* of Principle 1 is eschewing loss of future productive capacity of a fish stock for short term interests. One of the *criteria* for this is an assessment of fishing practice to determine if it is conducted in a manner that does not alter the age or genetic structure or sex composition and thus impair reproductive capacity.

It is the responsibility of the expert panel to set case-specific, relevant indicators of compliance with technical criteria. It is the responsibility of the CB to identify and provide the scientific evidence that appropriate fishing practices are in place and adequately meet all three principles (Owens 2008).

The full assessment is overseen by a panel which includes a fishery stock assessment expert, an ecosystem expert and a fishery management expert. The panel develops performance indicators which allow it to be evaluated against MSC certification criteria. The process involves collecting data on the fishery and arranging consultations with stakeholders throughout the process. In addition stakeholders are able to provide input into the process at any stage. The assessment team must demonstrate in their final report that stakeholder input has been considered.

The fishery is scored against the indicator framework and a preliminary report is issued for peer review and public comment. Following further revision and consultation, a decision on certification is announced and stakeholders who have been involved in the assessment process have an opportunity to challenge the certifiers' provisional decision.

If certification is awarded, it is valid for five years, subject to annual review. After this period a full scale re-assessment is required for certification renewal.

The final stage is a chain of custody assessment. Its purpose is to trace product through the whole, often very lengthy and complex supply chain, and ensure that integrity of origin claims is protected. This is often very challenging and time consuming, and may be a disproportionate cost burden for smaller operators. It is nevertheless acknowledged as absolutely essential to credibility and reliable monitoring (Gulbrandsen 2009).

VI. Assessing Impact of the MSC Certification Scheme

Several recent reports have compared MSC with other fisheries eco-labelling schemes and seafood recommendation lists. These reviews focus on the detailed workings of each scheme – relative costs, methodology for assessment/ recommendations, acceptance by the seafood industry and retailers – but provide little or no information about whether they achieve their aim of more sustainable fisheries.

The FAO Round Table Report (2009) states ‘There was some agreement that the MSC Fisheries Assessment methodology and related standardised assessment tree is currently the most useful methodological tool for assessing whether a fishery is sustainably managed’.

The MSC is also perceived to have been successful in changing behaviour of fishermen in many cases – the accreditation process has resulted in new working practices, switches to more environmentally benign fishing methods and increased awareness of environmental impacts.

The MSC accreditation process has identified gaps in policy frameworks and resource allocations by governments which have led to real changes in the way fisheries are managed.

However there is no clear evidence that the scheme has to date achieved its primary goal, which is improving the sustainability and environmental impact of the certified fisheries. (Owens 2008). ‘There has been little concrete evidence of the impact of eco-labelling and certification schemes on improvements in fisheries management and sustainability.’ The Round Table also noted: ‘There was initial speculation that the first fisheries to be certified were those that were already well managed’ (FAO 2009). This is unsurprising - MSC is a relatively recent initiative, and fisheries impacts take many years to become apparent. Furthermore, the scheme is considered by experts to be only one of the many factors affecting sustainability and condition of target fisheries.

MSC has had measurable impact at the fish buyer level. Most of the UK’s seafood is sold through multiples or food service companies, and buyers are crucial links in the chain between the producer and consumer. According to the FAO Round Table (FAO 2009) eco-labels provide a ‘burden of proof’ that products have been sourced ethically. The Round Table (2009) concluded that the retailers, through ‘enlightened self-interest’ are now driving demands for suppliers to be certified. Some supply chain operators however, prefer to stick to their own sourcing and marketing strategies for sustainability. Youngs Seafood, for example, use their own self-regulated ‘Fish for Life’ scheme. Other multiples are keen to promote their own-label premium range. An additional challenge in adoption of the MSc certification has been limitations on the range and volume of MSC certified products available. Retailers source uncertified product if there is a shortfall in supply against demand or stocking policy, using their own assessments of sustainability (FAO 2009).

The impact on consumer behaviour appears to be negligible. There is evidence that consumers are confused by the wide variety of advice on which types of seafood they should buy if they are concerned about sustainability (MRAG 2010, Accenture 2009, Greenpeace 2009, FAO 2009). Clearly MSC is intended to and has the potential to change consumer behaviour. However, most fishing industry commentators say that very few consumers are aware of MSC. The most common explanation offered for this is that it is now only one of the many schemes in existence. Confusion with the Marine Conservation Society (MCS) which is responsible for one of the seafood recommendation lists which aims to direct consumers to non-endangered species and/or sources has been observed for example (Makester, pers. comm). In the face of 'eco-label noise' consumers are said to be relying on grocery retailers to define the boundaries of their ethical purchasing decisions (FAO 2009). According to retailers, sustainability is difficult to market, particularly in a financial crisis when purchasing behaviour is more influenced by price. FAO (2009) suggests that industry cannot depend on consumers paying a price premium for sustainable seafood so affordability has to be 'built in'.

Impact of MSC accreditation is also limited to because its scope does not include aquaculture. Many consumers are unaware of the difference between farmed and wild seafood – to them it is all fish – and cannot understand why they should only look for the MSC label on wild fish and not on farmed produce. Farmed produce now makes up a very significant proportion of fish sold in multiples and consumed in restaurants. According to Seafish, the UK retail market for seafood was £2,733 million in 2008. Of this the species which are most likely of farmed origin are salmon totalling £590 million, warm water prawns £171 million and trout £45 million. Aquaculture sustainability certification is now being addressed by several other organisations, including WWF through the formation of the Aquaculture Stewardship Council[4]. ASC development has drawn heavily on the experience of the MSC, most notably the need to invest resources from the outset on an extensive multi-stakeholder consultation and consensus building process. The benefits of this investment and how well it aligns with the MSC goals and operations will only become apparent after ASC becomes operational in 2011.

[4] www.ascworldwide.org - In contrast to the MSC (and possibly learning from the MSC's development process, the ASC has been based on a multi-stakeholder consultative process from the start. The process was called Aquaculture Dialogues and involved series of workshops for each species group over the last 2-3 years. The ASC should be operational in 2011.

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Glossary

FAO	Food and Agriculture Organisation of the United Nations
MSC	Marine Stewardship Council
WWF	World Wildlife Fund or Worldwide Fund for Nature
MCS	Marine Conservation Society
by-catch	Fish (or other marine life) caught accidentally while fishing for a target species
Chain of custody	the ability to guarantee the identity and integrity of the specimen from collection through to reporting of test results

Annex

Technical Advisory Board & Stewardship Council Composition

Technical Advisory Board

- Dr David Agnew (UK) - Chair - November 2006 - Fisheries assessment scientist at Imperial College, London, focusing on aquatic ecology and fisheries management systems.
- Dr Lee Alverson (USA) - Emeritus - March 2005 - Fisheries assessment scientist with Natural Resources Consultants Inc, expert on fisheries management systems and supply chain.
- Richard Bradley (New Zealand) - May 2008 - Independent consultant, expert on certification and accreditation.
- Omar Defeo (Uruguay) - December 2009 - Fisheries scientist (Universidad de la República Oriental del Uruguay); fisheries management systems.
- Rich Marasco (USA) - December 2007 - Alaska Fisheries Science Center (retired); expert on fisheries management systems.
- Alastair Macfarlane (New Zealand) - March 2005 - New Zealand Seafood Industry Council, expert on seafood and fishing industry and chain of custody.
- Purwito Martosubroto (Indonesia) - December 2007 - Bogor Agricultural University, expert on fisheries management systems.
- Cliff Morrison (UK) - March 2005 - Young's Seafood, expert on ish processing and chain of custody.
- Dr Keith Sainsbury (Australia) - March 2005 - Fisheries assessment scientist working for Sainsolutions; expert on aquatic ecosystems and fisheries management systems.
- Stefan Salvador (Germany) - September 2008 - FSC policy manager with expertise inchain of custody, certification and accreditation.
- Dr Tony Smith (Australia) - September 2008 - Fisheries assessment scientist with CSIRO Marine Research.
- Adam Swan (UK) - September 2008 - Brakes, expert understanding of the seafood industry and chain of custody.
- Doug Vandevanter (USA) - January 2009 - Seafood industry; chain of custody.
- Dr Chang Zhang (Korea) - September 2005 - Marine and fisheries assessment scientist at the Pukyong National University. Expert on Asian fisheries and climate regime shifts in marine ecosystem and resources.

Stakeholder Council

Public Interest Category

- Alfred Schumm - Co-Chair, WWF Germany (October 2005).
- Dr Patrice Guillotreau - University of Nantes, France (April 2006).
- Gerry Leape - National Environmental Trust, US.
- Otto Langer - British Columbia Marine Conservation Council, Canada.
- Dr Esther Luiten - North Sea Foundation, The Netherlands (October 2005).
- Eddie Hegerl - Marine Ecosystem Policy Advisors P/L, Australia (April 2006).
- Mike Boots - Seafood Choices Alliance, US (April 2006).
- Marc Nolting - Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (GTZ), Philippines (April 2008).

- Christopher Zimmerman - Institut fuer Ostseefischerei (March 2008).
- Dr Dierk Peters - WWF / Unilever.
- Prof Eyiwunmi Falaye - University of Ibadan, Nigeria.
- Dr Luis Bourillón - COBI, Mexico.
- Dr Enir Reis - Universidade de Rio Grande, Brazil.
- Nancy Gitonga - FishAfrica, Kenya (December 2007).
- Commercial and Socio-economic Category.
- Christine Penney Co-Chair - Clearwater Seafoods, Canada (June 2007).
- Annie Jarrett - Pro-Fish Pty Ltd, Australia and Australian fishing industry representative.
- Guy Leyland - Western Australia Fishing Industry Council Inc (October 2005).
- Jim Gilmore - At-sea Processors Association, US.
- Jens Peter Klausen - J.P. Klausen & Co. A/S, Denmark (January 2006).
- Margaret Wittenberg - Whole Foods Market, US.
- Peter Redmond - (April 2006).
- Hans Jürgen Matern - METRO GROUP International, Germany (April 2006).
- John van Amerongen - Trident Seafoods, USA (April 2008).
- Ricky Partelle - Coles Australia (April 2008).
- David Graham - Unilever (March 2008).
- Herve Gomichon - Carrefour (June 2007).
- Libby Woodhatch - Seafood Scotland, UK (May 2008).
- Mike Mitchell - Youngs Bluecrest, UK (March 2008).
- Morten Jensen - Aker Seafoods, Norway (March 2008).
- Peter Dill - Deutschesee, Germany (March 2008).
- Charles Alan Roy Bross - South African Deep-Sea Trawling Industry Association (SADSTIA), South Africa (December 2009).
- Christina Burridge - BC Seafood Alliance, Canada (December 2009).