

Nothing to celebrate in orange roughy certification

Orange roughy – the long-lived, slow breeding and vulnerable fish species that provided a cautionary tale on the dangers of over-fishing – can now, we are told, go back on the menu of the eco-minded. Last December, the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) proudly ruled that New Zealand’s three of the main orange roughy fisheries have been certified as meeting the international standard for sustainable fishing.

Catches of orange roughy plummeted after 1990 as a result of over-exploitation, and by 2006 the fish was listed as a threatened species in Australia and two New Zealand fisheries had been closed. Yet now we are being led to believe that a supposed “turnaround” in New Zealand orange roughy stocks is a cause for optimism and rejoicing. Australians have been encouraged to eat orange roughy on the Marine Stewardship Council’s “Sustainable Seafood Day”, 31st March. And on 11th April, the seafood industry body Seafood New Zealand held a “celebration” of the Marine Stewardship Council certification of orange roughy.

But there is nothing to celebrate. The story of orange roughy fishing remains bleak. And the MSC’s tale of sudden success is disturbingly misleading. The MSC’s certification was opposed by Greenpeace, the Deep Sea Conservation Coalition (DSCC), ECO, the Worldwide Fund for Nature (WWF) and two European organisations, Seas At Risk and Bloom.

The New Zealand orange roughy fishery history has been one of serial depletion and repeated stock crashes. The unsustainability of orange roughy fish stocks is a crucial concern.

“It is a travesty that this obviously unsustainable fishery, which has been demonstrably overfished for many years, has been certified by MSC,” said Oliver Knowles, Oceans Campaigner for Greenpeace New Zealand. Controversy over the certification also involved the use of the old MSC standard which gives less weight to

impacts on the environment and the failure to include information which was circulating prior to the decision to certify the fishery. More on these problems as you need to know some facts before believing that orange roughy is a sustainable fish.

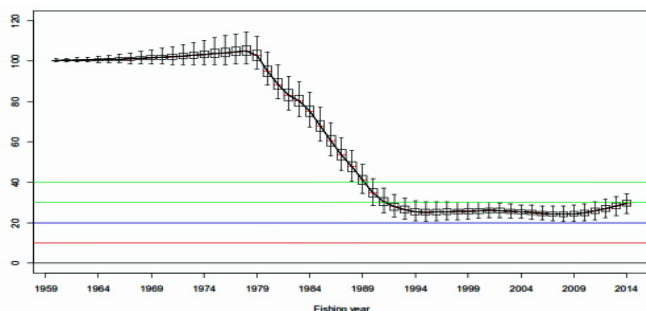
Built in incentives to certify

The first is that, although the MSC is a not-for-profit body, the way in which it is funded provides an incentive to keep the fishing industry happy. The system is set up so that fisheries bear the cost of being assessed for sustainability by the MSC. The MSC also receives income from its logo licensing fees. In other words, the more fish that have MSC certified-sustainable stickers in the shops, the more income the MSC receives. There is a built-in incentive to certify fisheries.

The credibility of this MSC sustainability certification takes another major blow because it failed to describe in the certification, and does not require labelling of, the means by which orange roughy are fished. They are scooped off the ocean floor by bottom trawling – a highly destructive technique where heavy metal rollers and nets are dragged over undersea mountains (seamounts), smashing every lifeform – including endangered corals and sponges – in their path. The practice has been likened to clear-felling forests to catch a flock of birds.

Bottom trawling is so destructive that the United Nations has passed a series of resolutions attempting to prevent significant adverse impacts on these vulnerable marine ecosystems. Yet a highly detailed promotional story on the MSC website praising the new NZ orange roughy certification makes no mention of the fishing technique, let alone its possible consequences.

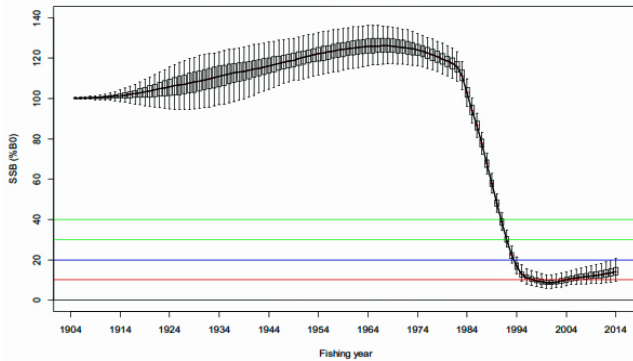
The independent assessor of the certification decision was given very limited freedom to challenge it, and upheld the certifier’s view that, while trawl contact might destroy coral, the “reasonably low proportion of the area trawled” meant that “a reasonably low proportion of the area is impacted.” In other words, yes, orange roughy fisheries destroy coral, but it doesn’t matter because it’s a big ocean. This flies in the face of the



The shape of a “sustainable” fishery - North-East and South Chatham Rise

Donate to ECO
You can donate to ECO via our
“givealittle” page
www.givealittle.co.nz/org/ECO
or directly via internet banking
38-9016-0185477-00

(donations over \$5 are tax deductible)



Shape of an unsustainable fishery - East Coast North Island orange roughy.

United Nations requirement that no significant impacts on vulnerable marine ecosystems is caused.

The Ministry of Primary Industry and its predecessor agencies (Mfish and MAF) after 20 years have not worked out what it means to protect “habitat of particular significance to fisheries management” So very little orange roughy habitat is protected from bottom fishing.

Documents excluded

The third fact to know is that the MSC excluded from consideration a large number of documents from its decision. This included a damning report by University of British Columbia, Auckland University and other researchers which provided evidence that the New Zealand fishing industry has been under-reporting and mis-reporting numbers of fish caught, and also dumping large numbers of the fish.

It also excluded a New Zealand Ministry of Primary Industries memo stating that it had been aware of the fish dumping and discarding issues for many years. Misreporting and fish dumping is important because it results in under-reporting of fishing and undermines fisheries management.

Basic Facts

The basic facts about orange roughy remain, wherever they are fished. This is a species that takes 30 years to reach sexual maturity, and this makes them effectively a non-renewable resource. The process of fishing them is devastating to the environment. As Clair Nouvian of the conservation association Bloom said of the MSC New Zealand decision: “The conclusion that fisheries would continue to be fished along existing tow lines is simply wrong. This is a serial depletion fishery which relies on continuing to find new fisheries to deplete.”

So no, there is nothing to celebrate in orange roughy certification. In New Zealand orange roughy fisheries are still closed, others overfished, and still others are

being fished without any agreed stock assessment of sustainability.

The New Zealand fishing industry should hang its head in shame that it is “greenwashing” a damaging fishery and undermining confidence in the MSC branding. No longer can the public have confidence that a MSC certified fishery is, as the MSC website describes it, “responsibly caught fish” “traced back to a sustainable source”.

ECOs Open Government Working Group

The Open Government Partnership’s (OGP) Independent Reporting Mechanism published an ‘End-of-Term Progress Report’ for New Zealand’s first Open Government Action Plan (2014-16) 1. The report summarises that the “*government process falls short of OGP’s co-creation guidelines, the commitments lacked clear activities for implementation, and the gains were marginal*” .

New Zealand’s second OGP Action Plan (2016-18) was published by the government on 20 October 2016. In a hastened attempt by the State Services Commission (SSC) to collaborate with the public on the commitments in should sign up to, a public co-creation workshop was held less than eight weeks before publication. ECO’s Open Government Working Group attended the workshop. Members raised concern that a lack of public participation in, and sense of ownership of, the open government action plan would result in low-ambition commitments.

The government New Zealand government has pledged to the following commitments:

- Commitment 1: Open Budget
- Commitment 2: Improving official information practices
- Commitment 3: Improving open data access and principles
- Commitment 4: Tracking progress and outcomes of open government data release
- Commitment 5: Ongoing engagement for OGP
- Commitment 6: Improving access to legislation
- Commitment 7: Improving policy practices

Despite an increase in commitments from four in 2014-16 to seven in 2016-18, New Zealand still lags behind other countries such as UK (13 commitments) and Canada (22 commitments). ECO values a free and open society, without which, members of the public would not be able to participate in decisions or to challenge abuses to the environment. The commitments above fail to address a list of major open government issues which includes, but is not exhausted by, a lack of transparency and public participation within major trade negotiations; non-transparency of Ministerial activities, a lack of transparency of how surveillance data is gathered and used by intelligence agencies; and whistleblower protection.

The ECO Working Group plans to launch a report of the results from its open government survey conducted last year.