

What Alaska's pullout tells us about the Marine Stewardship Council

Some rather troubling news for eco-labels this month with the decision by the Alaskan salmon fishing industry to withdraw from the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) programme. A decade ago, Alaska salmon became the first fishery of serious scale (with due apologies to Western Australian rock lobster and Thames herring) to become MSC certified and supermarket chains dutifully snapped up this welcome sustainable alternative to its tasteless and ecologically devastating farmed cousin. It was a great moment. Or so we thought.

The reason for the decision to leave, says the industry, is that the process of having the fishery re-certified every five years is too cumbersome and expensive. It cites a 50-year history of responsible management, and claims that there are other ways in which it can demonstrate its product's sustainability credentials. Importantly, some seafood companies argue that the competitive advantage of certification is waning as more and more products bearing the MSC stamp hit the marketplace.

At first sight, this decision seems totally kamikaze from a commercial point of view. Just as supermarket plans, some of which I have had a hand in designing, call for 100% certified sustainable seafood by this year or that, one of the flagship products that will help them meet those targets pulls out of the most respected certification programme around. But no industry would be stupid enough to pull out of an eco-labelling system without gauging market reaction first. Would it?

Groups like MSC spend most of their working hours being attacked. The industry complains the standards are too rigorous. Environmentalists scream they are too lax. Retailers seek clarity so they can plan for supply. Governments snooze. Certifications stall for months or even years as objections are filed, conditions are negotiated and political wrangles threaten progress at every turn. You don't join the MSC for an easy life, and the Alaska salmon industry (made up of some of America's largest seafood processors) has clearly decided life in the programme is just too tricky.

In the five years during which I ran the MSC, governance rows and standoffs between conflicting parties (including those who should have been on the same side as each other) started life as irritating squabbles and ended up as one big, giant, monstrous farce. I have still never shared in public the manoeuvring and shenanigans that marked my final year at the MSC, and will not do so for fear of undermining the organisation that gave me my start in the conservation world. It would also embarrass far too many people. No-one, myself included, emerges from it unscathed. It represented the conservation movement at its most self-destructive and imbecilic, fuelled by foundations spending other people's money who should have known far better. It was an ugly period that preserved entrenched prejudices but very few fish.

There is a serious point at stake here. Although anyone at the MSC will anticipate regular tantrums from hard line conservationists and frustrated mutterings from seafood buyers and sellers in a hurry to make a profit, I certainly hadn't banked on a (relatively) uncontroversial MSC fixture like Alaskan salmon throwing in the towel. In my day we

spent hours trying to work out how to kick a fishery out of the programme so Greenpeace and others might stop thinking we were a front for the industry or a Satanic incarnation.

We failed, because there was, at the time, no compelling argument to do so. We did not spend even a second preparing for industry itself to say 'Enough is enough – we're leaving'. I suspect the current MSC did not either. It's important to understand that the Alaska salmon certification is among the least controversial and polarising of all major MSC certifications. That's why we should be taking this development very seriously indeed. This isn't a predictable storming out by a college candidate about to fail their exam.

The worrying thing is this sets a precedent and others may be tempted to follow. There is nothing like safety in numbers. There are even bigger fisheries in the programme with bigger complaints about the insane structures that at times make it impossible for the MSC (and other certification groups) to function effectively. And the reality is that supermarkets need high volume fisheries to supply the products they sell. Alaskan salmon is a better sustainability bet than its rivals any day. With or without a label. This is the calculation they have made. What will a retailer that delists the product replace it with? Greenpeace still refuses to support the Marine Stewardship Council, so that often welcome kick up the backside to the big chains doesn't exist either. A good fishery is refusing to use a label granted to fisheries that everyone knows are a lot worse than Alaska salmon. It's not a sustainable proposition, in this form.

Some will argue that as more and more MSC products flood the marketplace it won't matter either way, and the Alaskan salmon industry will look like ignorant and hasty rednecks for withdrawing from the programme. Time will tell. But if others follow, it will prove once and for all that the paralysis and bureaucracy inherent in the MSC's governance (which was light touch by design until it was hijacked by those more concerned with process than outcome) is a multi million dollar death sentence, administered slowly and painfully. If not for the organisation then for the real issue at hand: sustainable seafood. I have no doubt that the auditing the Alaska salmon industry says will replace MSC will be inferior to the system used for the last ten years. But I'd be hard pushed to tell a retailer to delist the product just because it didn't carry the blue stamp of approval. And that is something I never thought I'd say. I'll be watching other fisheries with great interest. Especially in Alaska.

Conservationists are right to attack bad certifications and stand up to big business and its lobby groups. But if their gift to the oceans is the mind numbing governance that drives progressive and well managed industries away from the MSC table, it will be a poor legacy indeed.

(Written by former MSC official)