

A photograph of two fishermen on a boat, each holding a large fish. They are wearing hats and casual clothing. The background shows the ocean and a clear sky.

Fishing and the Sustainable Development Goals:

How the MSC program enables meaningful action and measurement towards delivering the SDGs

September 2023

The fishing and seafood sector has an important role to play in delivering the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in particular SDG 14, Life below water. This briefing sets out the role of sustainable fishing and seafood certification in supporting sustainable development across environmental, social and economic goals. It summarises an analysis of how engaging with the Marine Stewardship Council's (MSC) program for sustainable fishing contributes to five SDGs, and how governments and businesses can access the MSC's tools and data to demonstrate their efforts towards delivering these shared targets.

Key messages

- Fishing and seafood production are intrinsically linked to economic prosperity, livelihoods, nutrition, biodiversity and ecosystems. Efforts to improve the sustainability of fishing support the delivery of multiple SDGs.
- Sustainable fishing is integral to delivering SDG 14, Life below water, which includes targets to end overfishing and protect and restore ecosystems. Delivering this goal also supports the delivery of multiple other SDGs. However, SDG 14 has been acknowledged as one of the most difficult to achieve¹ and despite its importance has seen limited progress². No country is close to achieving SDG14³.
- Analysis shows that organisations, including fisheries, governments and seafood companies, that engage with the MSC program are helping to deliver at least 34 targets across five SDGs. Their commitments to MSC certification support environmental, social and economic sustainability.
- Some national governments and businesses are already using certification to the MSC's standards as evidence of progress towards targets in SDG14. Data from the MSC program is already recognised by the UN as an indicator for measuring actions to safeguard the ocean and biodiversity. This data is available to the international community, including governments, businesses and investors, to monitor and credibly evidence efforts to deliver the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals

The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were established in 2015 and are set to run until 2030. These 17 global goals, which include 169 targets, provide a framework to address the urgent challenges for environmental, social and economic sustainable development. They are a shared vision for the future to guide governments, industry, non-profit organisations and the entire global community in working together for a better world. Member states are expected to implement the SDGs in their national frameworks and frequently report on their progress, with many businesses doing the same.

With 2023 marking the halfway point to the 2030 deadlines set for most SDGs, the pressure to accelerate progress is increasing.

The importance of sustainable fishing and seafood

Fishing and seafood production are intrinsically linked to economic prosperity, livelihoods, nutrition, biodiversity, and ecosystems, with benefits that span multiple SDGs.

For many countries, fishing plays a vital role in food security (SDG2), providing healthy nutrition for billions of people⁹ (SDG 3). Fishing and seafood production also employ millions of people (SDG 1), and, as the world’s most traded food commodity, seafood is essential to many national economies (SDG 8). Sustainable fisheries management, which contributes to higher and more stable seafood production over the long-term, therefore offers opportunities to secure food, livelihoods and economic stability for future generations.

From an environmental perspective, as the impacts of climate change (SDG 13) take hold, fisheries will need to adapt to changes in the distribution of fish stocks. Recent research has also demonstrated the potential of food from the ocean to help reduce carbon emissions from food¹⁰.

Sustainable fishing, that reduces environmental impacts and prevents overexploitation, is essential to achieving and maintaining productive and healthy marine ecosystems (SDG 14). And efforts to improve the sustainability of fishing are encouraging responsible consumption and production (SDG 12) and building constructive partnerships across industry, government, business, NGOs and scientific institutions (SDG 17). The sustainable transformation of the fishing industry is also leading to innovation that will increase the efficiency of seafood harvests and lead to more environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes (SDG 9).

Figure 1:
How seafood contributes to the achievement of several SDGs



“ This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity... All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan... We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path.

From the Resolution adopted by the UN General Assembly on 25 September 2015, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

600 million
people are employed in fishing and seafood production⁴

US\$151 billion
value of global seafood trade per year⁵

3.3 billion
people rely on seafood for at least 20% of their protein intake⁶

72 million
more people could have their protein needs if all fishing were sustainable⁷

US\$80 billion
in economic benefits are lost every year due to overfishing⁸

The importance of SDG 14 ‘Life Below Water’

SDG 14, *Life below water*, aims to “conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”. This goal has been identified as critical for the delivery of other SDGs, in particular those related to hunger, economic growth and partnership¹¹. Despite this, SDG 14 remains significantly underfunded¹² and one of the least studied¹³. On average, only 1.2% of national research budgets were allocated for ocean science between 2013 and 2017¹⁴. This proportion is miniscule compared with the modestly estimated US\$1.5 trillion contribution of the ocean to the global economy in 2010¹⁵.

SDG 14 has been acknowledged as one of the most difficult to achieve¹⁶. Analysis shows that SDG 14’s targets, particularly related to overfishing, have seen limited progress¹⁷. No country is close to achieving SDG 14¹⁸. As a result, ‘Life below water’ remains high on the international agenda, with the UN calling for urgent, coordinated, global action to continue to advance towards delivering these targets¹⁹.

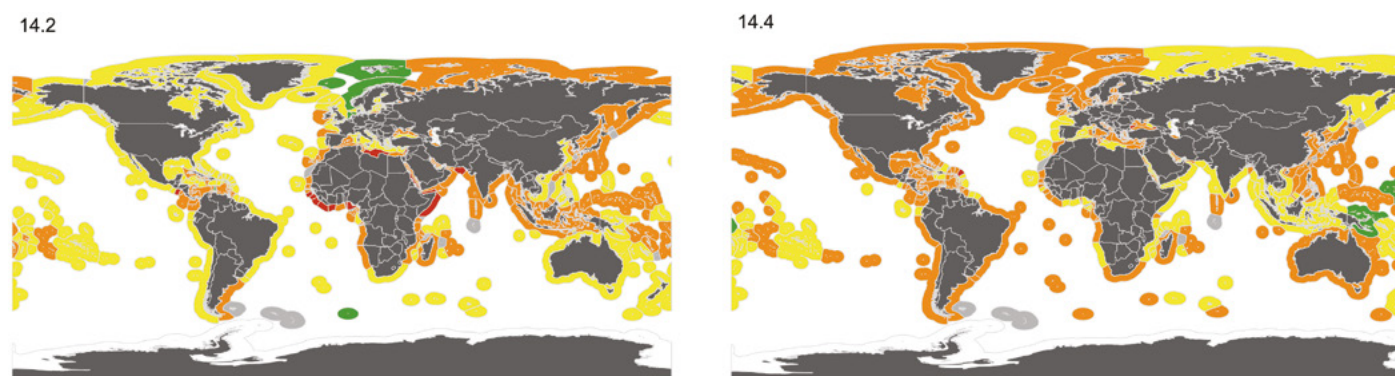
The global fishing sector has a vital role in delivering SDG 14. Of particular importance are SDG 14.2, *to manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to achieve healthy and productive oceans*, and SDG 14.4, *to effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing*. Both of these targets had deadlines of 2020, with one 2022 study showing that Europe and Oceania had made the most overall progress²⁰ (figure 2). Target 14.4 has seen the slowest progress of any SDG 14 target with only the Marshall Islands, Papua New Guinea and Tuvalu securing sustainable fish stocks²¹.

The past eight years have seen progress to improve international fisheries management, for example with the Port State Measures Agreement, the agreement for Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdictions (BBNJ) and the World Trade Organization’s agreement to end harmful fishing subsidies. Better management of our ocean resources is beginning to pay off. Many of the world’s largest commercial fish stocks have seen significant health improvements, with 82.5% of 2019 landings from biologically sustainable stocks, a 3.8% improvement from 2017²². However, destructive trends continue²³. The rate of overfishing continues to increase from around 10% of monitored stocks in the 1970s to more than 35% in 2020²⁴. Scientists estimate that at least 25% marine mammals are at risk of extinction²⁵.

The benefits of delivering on SDG 14 targets are significant. According to the World Bank, ending overfishing could help to deliver US\$80 billion in economic benefits a year²⁶. Analysis by the MSC has found that ending overfishing could provide enough protein for 72 million additional people a year²⁷, providing vital nutrients to millions²⁸.

The UN suggests that the recovery of 98% of currently overfished stocks would be possible by the middle of the century if appropriate governance was in place²⁹. Delivering this potential will require sustained collaboration and joint action, together with investment.

Figure 2: Global maps of achievement of the SDG 14 targets 14.2 and 14.4



“ When it comes to wild-catch fisheries, effective management has proven to be the most effective approach to conserving aquatic resources... Effective management, along with its errant twin ineffective management, hold important keys to our achievement of SDG 14.

Peter Thomson, United Nations Secretary General’s Special Envoy for the Ocean

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SDG 14 targets relevant to sustainable fishing



TARGET 14.1

REDUCE MARINE POLLUTION

By 2025, prevent and significantly reduce marine pollution of all kinds, in particular from land-based activities, including marine debris and nutrient pollution.



TARGET 14.7

INCREASE THE ECONOMIC BENEFITS FROM SUSTAINABLE USE OF MARINE RESOURCES

By 2030, increase the economic benefits to small island developing States and least developed countries from the sustainable use of marine resources, including through sustainable management of fisheries, aquaculture and tourism.



TARGET 14.2

PROTECT AND RESTORE ECOSYSTEMS

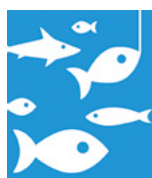
By 2020, sustainably manage and protect marine and coastal ecosystems to avoid significant adverse impacts, including by strengthening their resilience, and take action for their restoration in order to achieve healthy and productive oceans.



TARGET 14.A

INCREASE SCIENTIFIC KNOWLEDGE, RESEARCH AND TECHNOLOGY FOR OCEAN HEALTH

Increase scientific knowledge, develop research capacity and transfer marine technology, taking into account the Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission Criteria and Guidelines on the Transfer of Marine Technology, in order to improve ocean health and to enhance the contribution of marine biodiversity to the development of developing countries, in particular small island developing States and least developed countries.



TARGET 14.4

SUSTAINABLE FISHING

By 2020, effectively regulate harvesting and end overfishing, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and destructive fishing practices and implement science-based management plans, in order to restore fish stocks in the shortest time feasible, at least to levels that can produce maximum sustainable yield as determined by their biological characteristics.



TARGET 14.B

SUPPORT SMALL SCALE FISHERS

Provide access for small-scale artisanal fishers to marine resources and markets.



TARGET 14.5

CONSERVE COASTAL AND MARINE AREAS

By 2020, conserve at least 10% of coastal and marine areas, consistent with national and international law and based on the best available scientific information.



TARGET 14.C

IMPLEMENT AND ENFORCE INTERNATIONAL SEA LAW

Enhance the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources by implementing international law as reflected in the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, which provides the legal framework for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans and their resources, as recalled in paragraph 158 of “The future we want”.



TARGET 14.6

END SUBSIDIES CONTRIBUTING TO OVERFISHING

By 2020, prohibit certain forms of fisheries subsidies which contribute to overcapacity and overfishing, eliminate subsidies that contribute to illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing and refrain from introducing new such subsidies, recognizing that appropriate and effective special and differential treatment for developing and least developed countries should be an integral part of the World Trade Organization fisheries subsidies negotiation.

Target 14.3, reduce ocean acidification, is the only SDG 14 target not relevant to sustainable fishing.

Analysis shows that the MSC program contributes to all SDG 14 targets apart from 14.3 and 14.6.

How the MSC program supports delivery of the SDGs

New analysis by the MSC shows that fisheries, governments and companies' involvement in the MSC program is helping to deliver 34 targets across five of the most relevant SDGs relating to zero hunger, decent work, ocean conservation, sustainable consumption, and partnerships. While the benefits of MSC certification may extend beyond these goals, these five SDGs are the most pertinent to the MSC's vision of oceans teeming with life and seafood supplies safeguarded for future generations.

Sustainable fisheries management, as set down in the MSC Standard, contributes to zero hunger (SDG 2) by ensuring higher and more stable fishery productivity over the long-term. It has been estimated that 72 million more people each year could have their protein needs met if all fisheries were managed sustainably³¹. Increasing the proportion of fish stocks that are sustainably managed has been shown to be an important component of increasing global food security and nutrition³².

Securing the long-term future of fishing communities and those involved in the fishing sector, will be accomplished by securing the long-term future of ocean resources. 600 million people are employed in the fishing and seafood sector globally³³. Fisheries involved in the MSC program are therefore contributing to SDG 8, relating to decent work and economic growth.

The MSC program supports the growth of sustainable seafood supply chains by providing a credible global framework based on the UN's guidelines for sustainable fishing with which fisheries, governments and businesses can focus efforts, investment and science to achieve internationally recognised standards for sustainable fishing. The MSC also provides tools and funding to support improvements, together with data to demonstrate tangible actions. This supports SDG 14, Life below water, as well SDG 12 on sustainable consumption.

Stocks which are targeted by MSC certified fisheries score higher on key sustainability criteria including abundance of fish, than those which are targeted non-certified fisheries³⁴. The [MSC Fisheries Standard](#) directly helps to deliver SDG 14 across multiple targets. This includes target 14.2 to protect and restore marine ecosystems, 14.4 to effectively regulate harvesting, end overfishing and implement science-based management plans, 14.A to increase scientific knowledge for ocean health and 14.C to implement and enforce international sea law. In some contexts, MSC certification also contributes to reducing marine pollution (14.1) and conserving coastal marine areas (14.5), while the MSC program overall supports the economic benefits from sustainable fishing (14.7) and small scale fisheries (14.B).

The MSC program in numbers

> 19%
of wild marine catch

> 670
fisheries engaged*

> 2,200
fisheries improvements

> 5,000
certified supply chain partners

20,000+
products with the MSC label sold
in 66 countries

US\$12.4 billion
retail sales with the MSC label
in 2022-23

* Engaged means fisheries certified or in assessment to the MSC Fisheries Standard

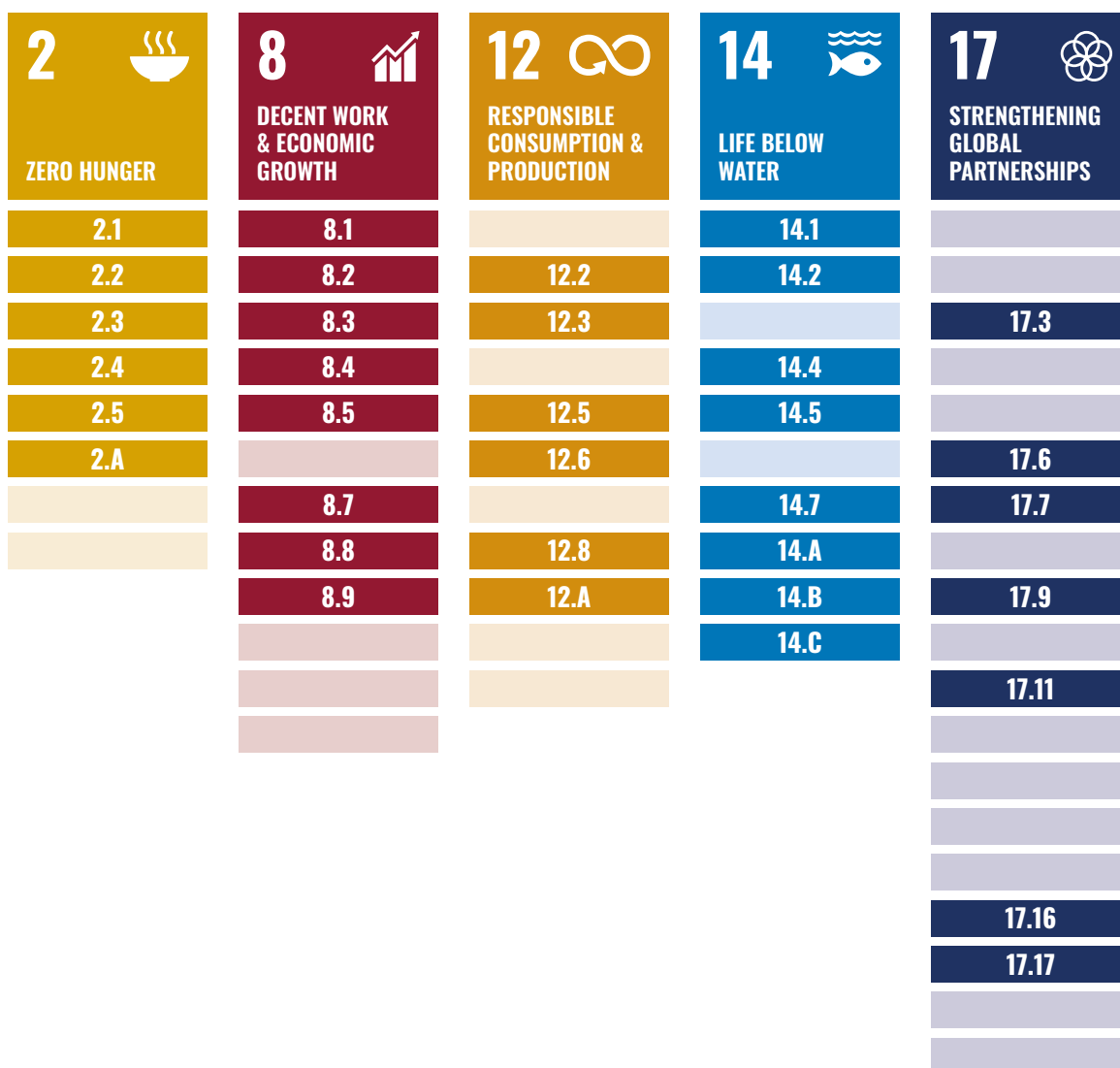


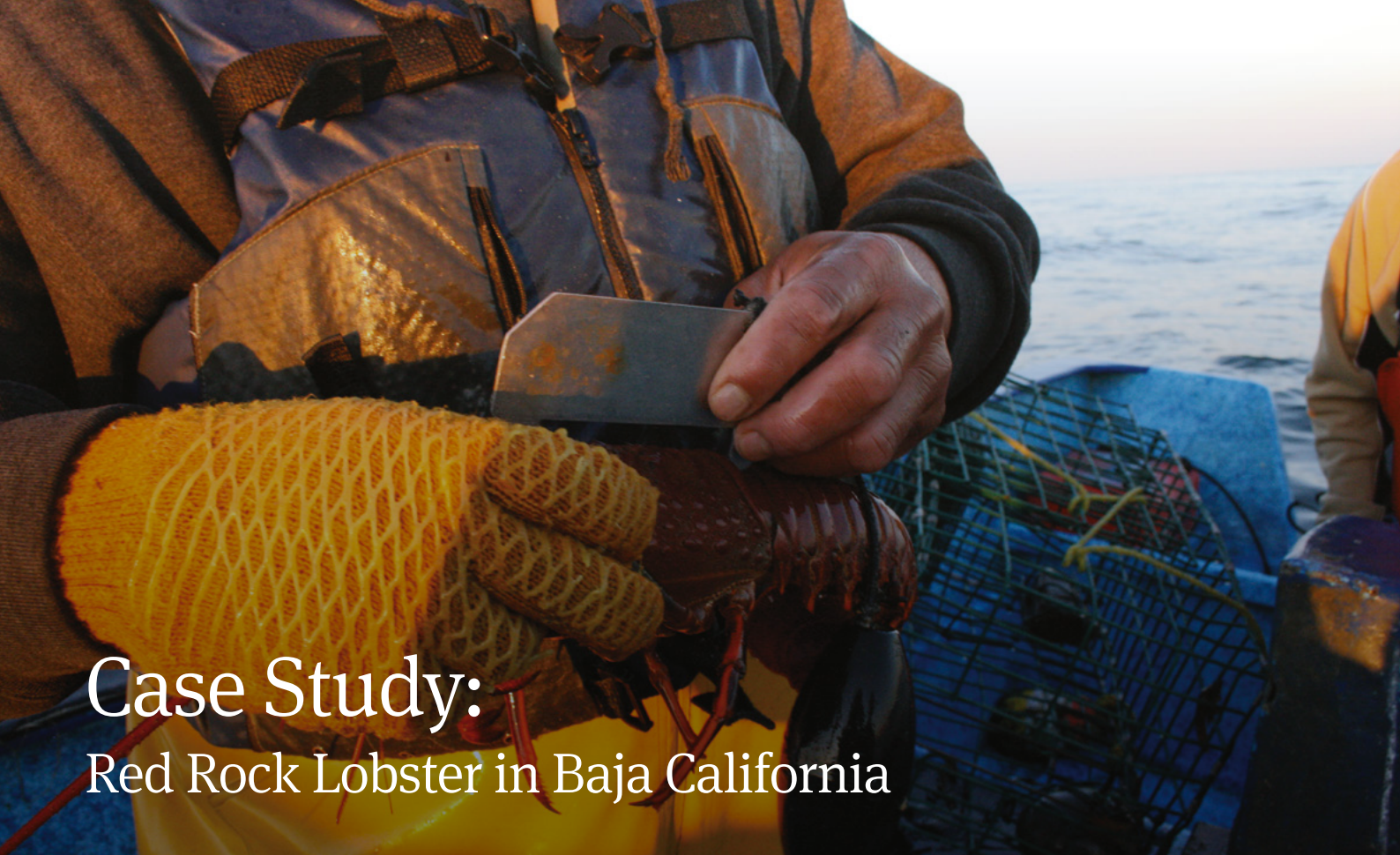
Retailer and brand commitments to MSC certification can also provide a financial incentive for sustainable fishing through market demand for certified seafood with the [blue MSC ecolabel](#). The MSC works with some of the world’s leading retailers and seafood brands to influence positive change within the seafood sector. It is also helping to increase understanding of the importance of choosing sustainable seafood, with global marketing and communications campaigns reaching millions of people every year. This helps to drive sustainable consumption (SDG 12).

The MSC works with stakeholders from across the seafood sector including business, governments, conservationists and scientists helping to build collaborative partnerships needed to transform the seafood sector, and deliver SDG 17. Almost half (48%) of the 225 NGOs, seafood industry professionals and experts from 31 countries who took part in the MSC’s [SDG leadership forum for Goal 14 in 2019](#) believe that sustainable sourcing policies are the most effective way to accelerate progress towards ending the crisis facing the oceans.

Overall, the MSC’s analysis shows that efforts to meet the MSC standards, and commitments to certified sustainable seafood, are helping deliver at least 34 different SDG targets out of a possible 60 targets across SDGs 2, 8, 12, 14 and 17. A breakdown of this new analysis can be found in the appendix.

Figure 3: How engaging with the MSC program contributes to delivering SDGs 2, 8, 12, 14 and 17





Case Study: Red Rock Lobster in Baja California

In 2001 the Red Rock Lobster fishery in Baja California in Mexico became the first small scale fishery from a developing economy to be MSC certified. The certified fishery is made up of nine of the 10 cooperatives that are part of the Regional Federation of Cooperative Societies of Baja California (FEDECOOP) which collectively employ 2,000 people in lobster production, processing and export. The fishery lands around 1,300 tonnes of lobster per year, around 90% of which is exported live to Asia bringing valuable export income to the region.

MSC certification of the fishery was originally supported by the NGO Comunidad y Biodiversidad (COBI) as a strategy to make new social and economic incentives available to the best managed fisheries in the country. Certification was seen by the fishing cooperative to support international recognition and government support for the fishery as well as an opportunity to compete on the international market with the Western Australian Rock Lobster fishery. The fishery received funding for its initial certification from the Mexican government and WWF.

The benefits of certification have included improved management of the fishery and helped to secure community investment, including provision of infrastructure, electricity and fishing gear. To maintain its MSC certification the fishery has delivered improvements to its sustainability, including diligently recording bycatch, tracking discarded fish and improving its harvest strategies, providing the evidence needed to show with greater certainty that the lobster stock is sustainably fished.

This example shows how working with the MSC sustainable fishing program can contribute to SDG 14, life below water, and SDG 17, partnerships, as well as SDG 8, decent work and economic growth.



MSC data to measure SDG contributions

As the deadline for completion of the SDGs grows nearer, there is increasing interest in how to credibly measure progress towards these global goals. Data from the MSC program can be used by governments, business and NGOs in reporting on actions to support delivery of the SDGs. This data is already formally recognised as an indicator to delivering the UN Biodiversity Framework, it is also recognised by the UN Environment Program and is available at a global and national scale.

Both the UN Fisheries & Agriculture Organisation's [State of World Fisheries and Aquaculture 2020 report](#) and the UN's [5th Global Biodiversity Outlook report](#) highlight MSC certified fisheries that are contributing to progress towards the SDG targets.

Examples of data available from the MSC:

- MSC certified catch volumes**
- MSC certified catch as a percentage of total catch
- Number of MSC certified supply chain operations**
- Number of products with the MSC label†
- Volumes of products sold with the MSC label†

* [UN Biodiversity Framework Indicators](#)

† [Indicator for the Biodiversity Indicators Partnership](#)

Financial institutions such as SMN in Norway are already using MSC certification to verify sustainability claims, with WWF and the UNEP Financial Initiative recognising MSC certification as an indicator of responsible investment in fisheries production³⁵. In 2020 the Government of India included fisheries certification as an action towards delivering SDG 14 in its Voluntary National Review on sustainable development³⁶. Many businesses and governments have also incorporated commitments to achieving MSC certification into their commitments to deliver SDG 14 at the Our Oceans Conference³⁷.

Seven years for action

In conclusion, sustainable fishing and seafood supply chains offer huge potential to support the global ambitions set out by the SDGs, with the potential to bring local and world-wide benefits for people and planet. However, achieving Goal 14, Life below water, is proving to be one of the most challenging, requiring international cooperation, investment, science and collaboration across sectors.

Governments, fisheries and businesses looking to accelerate action on SDGs can use the MSC program as a framework to identify, deliver and measure tangible actions towards achieving multiple SDGs, in particular SDG 14. The tools, data and standards provided by the MSC have been developed over 25 years in consultation with stakeholders from across the globe, to provide a rigorous and accessible program which is helping to put our wild-capture fisheries on a pathway to sustainability.

“ We have a route map agreed by 193 nations to fulfil the SDGs by 2030; now is the best chance for humanity to move onto a more sustainable and equitable trajectory—to double down and deliver. The MSC has an aspirational target to engage a third of global landings. This will make a significant contribution, through the leadership of our partners, to the delivery of SDG 14.

Rupert Howes, Chief Executive, MSC

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The MSC has a goal for over a third of global wild seafood harvest to be engaged with our program by 2030. To achieve our vision of oceans teeming with life and seafood supplies secured for this and future generations, we are seeking to grow our global partnerships through our work with fisheries, business, governments and NGOs to help to ensure that sustainable fishing is at the centre of efforts to achieve global progress envisaged by the SDGs.

Visit [msc.org](https://www.msc.org) for details on the tools, funding and data available from MSC.

Appendix:

Analysis of contributions to SDGs via participation in the MSC program

The contributions made by organisations participating in the MSC program to SDGs 2, 8, 12, 14 and 17 have been categorised as:

- 1). **Direct contributions**, where explicit linkages have been identified between the MSC Fisheries Standard and the SDG target
- 2). **Context specific**, where there is a possible contribution to a target from fisheries achieving the MSC Fisheries Standard
- 3). **MSC program-wide contributions**, which are delivered by the MSC program as a whole

SDG2: Zero hunger

“End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture”

DIRECT CONTRIBUTION:

- 2.4: Ensure sustainable food production systems
- 2.5: Maintain genetic diversity in food production

CONTEXT SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION:

- 2.1: End hunger and ensure access to safe, nutritious and sufficient food

MSC PROGRAM-WIDE CONTRIBUTION:

- 2.2: End all forms of malnutrition
- 2.3: Double productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers ... in particular ... fishers
- 2.A: Increase investment

SDG8: Decent work

“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”

DIRECT CONTRIBUTION:

- 8.4: Improve resource efficiency in consumption production

MSC PROGRAM-WIDE CONTRIBUTION:

- 8.1: Sustainable economic growth
- 8.2: Diversify, innovate and upgrade for economic productivity
- 8.3: Promote policies to support job creation and growing enterprises
- 8.5: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work
- 8.7: End modern slavery, trafficking and child labour
- 8.8: Protect labour rights and promote safe working environments
- 8.9 Promote beneficial and sustainable tourism

SDG12: Responsible consumption and production

“Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns”

DIRECT CONTRIBUTION:

- 12.2: Sustainable management and use of natural resources
- 12.3: Halve global per capital food waste
- 12.A: Support developing countries scientific and technological capacity for sustainable consumption and production

CONTEXT SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION:

- 12.5: Sustainably reduce waste generation

MSC PROGRAM-WIDE CONTRIBUTION:

- 12.6: Encourage companies to adopt sustainable practices and sustainability reporting
- 12.8: Promote universal understanding of sustainable lifestyles

SDG 14: Life below water

“Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development”

DIRECT CONTRIBUTION:

- 14.2: Protect and restore ecosystems
- 14.4: Sustainable fishing
- 14.A: Increase scientific knowledge, research and technology for ocean health
- 14.C: Implement and enforce international sea law

CONTEXT SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION:

- 14.1: Reduce marine pollution
- 14.5: Conserve coastal and marine areas

MSC PROGRAM-WIDE CONTRIBUTION:

- 14.7: Increase the economic benefits from sustainable use of marine resources
- 14.B: Support small scale fishers

SDG17: Strengthening global partnerships for sustainable development

“Strengthen the means for implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”

CONTEXT SPECIFIC CONTRIBUTION:

- 17.16: Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships
- 17.17: Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships

MSC PROGRAM-WIDE CONTRIBUTION:

- 17.3: Mobilize financial resources for developing countries
- 17.6: Enhance international cooperation on and access to science, technology and innovation and enhance knowledge sharing
- 17.7: Promote the development, transfer, dissemination and diffusion of environmentally sound technologies to developing countries
- 17.9: Enhance international support for implementing effective and targeted capacity-building in developing countries
- 17.11: Significantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries' share of global exports by 2020

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