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Perspectives of multi-geared, export-oriented, small-scale fishery pre-assessment for MSC certification: a case from Sri Lankan blue swimming crab fishery

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Eco-labelling, the market based mechanism designed to influence the purchasing decisions of consumers and the procurement policies of retailers, is becoming essential in sustainable seafood trade. The Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) is the world leader in certification and eco-labelling programmes for wild capture fisheries. The certification of a fishery product generally gives the seller a competitive advantage and a price premium since it is often associated with superior quality. The economic benefits gained through price premium are the main motivated force for many fishers, exporters and politicians to adopt eco-labeling process apart from its major objective of adhering to sustainability of marine resources. The export oriented *Portunus pelagicus* (blue swimming crab) fishery, if accredited with MSC, will get an advantage over the neighboring countries which illegally rely on Sri Lankan crab resources. Hence, a data-poor small-scale fishery of blue swimming crab in the northern part of Sri Lanka, was pre-assessed to identify the gaps that fishery has to achieve MSC accreditations and to ensure its capacity for further improvements. The three principles of MSC standards: sustainable target fish stock; environmental impact of fishing and effective management, were scored according to the MSC fishery standard guidelines developed for 31 indicators known as the "default assessment tree", by contacting direct and indirect stakeholder groups and other interested-parties (n = 2881) in Jaffna, Kilinochchi, Mullaithivu and Mannar districts using questionnaires, interviews, group discussion and published information from January to November 2016. The 29 stakeholder groups interviewed were categorized into 9 major clusters based on their perceptions and involvements on the fishery. The blue swimming crab fishery failed to meet the MSC requirements to pass performance indicators, Score Guidepost - SG 60 levels, for sustainable fisheries. The assessment suggested that that the biological status of the fishery, may pass its seven performance indicators, but would subsequently need to meet conditions applied by the independent MSC assessor. The scarcity of information was the major issue for lowering overall scores. Apart from the bottom-set gillnet catches, the industry sustains by multi-geared catches of trawls, trap-nets, beach seines, which caused relatively high environmental impacts, had led to considerable drop in scores. The bottom-set gillnet by-catches were found to be comparatively low. Therefore, if the industry can sustain from gillnet catches, which comprise approximately >90% of total production, or to use alternative crab traps, the gaps between the present status and the MSC criteria can be minimized. Wiliness of exporters and retailers to bear the MSC certification cost, motivated by future economic returns, is one of the strongest points for a small-scale fishery like *P. pelagicus* fishery in a developing country.

Keywords: By-catch, Marine Stewardship Council, Small-scale fishery, Target catch