

Deep Dive

A sustainable future for Southern Ocean fisheries

How MSC certification has helped restore consumer confidence in Patagonian and Antarctic toothfish



Patagonian toothfish live in the cold waters of the southern Atlantic, Indian, and Pacific Oceans, a vast area spanning the territorial seas of multiple countries, as well as high seas regions. Antarctic toothfish reside even further south, closer to the Antarctic continent.



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Both are commercially and ecologically important species, and around South America the fisheries for Patagonian toothfish are also vital for local communities.

Despite the complexities of managing such wide-ranging fish stocks, and historical issues with IUU fishing, the toothfish industry has been charting a sustainable course over the past 20 years, overcoming its once-damaged reputation among consumers.

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the illicit fishing of toothfish was threatening the sustainability of stocks, undermining the livelihoods of fishing operators, and having a detrimental impact on other marine wildlife, including some albatross species. This negative spiral led not only to the loss of 32,000 tonnes of fish in a single year at its peak, but also prompted widespread mistrust among consumers. Because they couldn't confidently tell if the toothfish they were buying had been caught legitimately, consumers bought fewer toothfish, and prices plummeted.

Over the past 20 years, thanks to a combined effort involving industry members, international non-profit organisations, and national governments, who joined forces with the Commission for the Conservation of Antarctic Marine Living Resources, IUU has been virtually eliminated in the Southern Ocean, bird bycatch has been dramatically reduced (see MSC Global Impacts Report, 2016), and the impacted toothfish stocks have significantly recovered.

In 2015, Austral Fisheries – a member of the Coalition of Legal Toothfish Operators and an MSC certified fishery – even joined in the pursuit of one of the last-known pirate vessels, the notorious FV Thunder.

In all, the sustainable management of seven toothfish fisheries has now been recognised with MSC certification. In addition to incentivising countermeasures to IUU fishing, this process has triggered further improvements. For example:

- In 2004 the South Georgia Patagonian toothfish longline became the first such fishery to achieve MSC certification. South Georgia and the South Sandwich Islands have since introduced a number of mechanisms to combat IUU fishing, implemented improvements to bycatch management and created a large marine protected area. The South Georgia toothfish fishery was recertified in 2009 and again in 2014, each time with no conditions.
- Australia's Heard Island and McDonald Islands Patagonian toothfish fishery was certified as sustainable in 2012. An AU\$1.2 million joint research project and data-sharing agreement between French and Australian scientists improved the understanding of toothfish stock status across the Kerguelen Plateau (an area of sea comprising both country's fishing

zones) enabling this fishery and the MSC certified Kerguelen Island toothfish fishery to close conditions on stock status.

- The Kerguelen Island fishery, home to globally significant breeding populations of grey petrels, has also implemented a number of measures to reduce interactions with seabirds. Before 2005 at least 750 petrels were killed each year, but in 2014-15 that number had dropped to just three. Read the full story – Beating Bird Bycatch – in the 2016 Global Impacts Report (MSC, 2016, pages 34-35).

Aside from improvements on the water, the MSC Chain of Custody Standard has also played an important role in ensuring toothfish supply chains are free of illegally caught fish. By implementing automated, secure at-sea labelling, maintaining the necessary records and supply chain monitoring systems, and understanding the volume of legally caught products, the Standard effectively segregates MSC toothfish from those caught illegally. This is bolstered by ongoing DNA testing to confirm that toothfish products are correctly labelled.

“The MSC certification process marks a step-change in the way that fisheries are managed and in how they are perceived by consumers. South Georgia is proud to lead by example. By working with the fishing industry and other stakeholders there is a shared sense of responsibility for demonstrating the highest levels of sustainability.”

James Jansen, Government of South Georgia & the South Sandwich Islands

“The MSC process has driven real improvements in the management of toothfish in the Southern Ocean. Certification has not only helped us to reach new consumers with our product, it has facilitated terrific conversations with policymakers, commercial partners and stakeholder groups, ensuring a positive future for our fisheries.”

David Carter, Austral Fisheries