

to all players in the value chain. The authors go on to promote a Government-led sustainability certificate. This essentially is a self-certification or territorial eco-certification which also has distinct dimensions of transnationality similar to the MSC, that comes to bear on fisheries governance and production networks<sup>5</sup>. The authors fail to mention these intricacies, and also, more importantly, that nearly a dozen fisheries in India have recently moved towards MSC certification due to market demand for sustainably fished products from the importers<sup>6</sup>. This seems highly prejudicial and not adhering to scientific ethics.

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### Response

We appreciate the comments of Mohamed and Malayilethu regarding our article in *Current Science*.

While claiming to be ‘clearing the haze around ecolabelling’, they have conveniently maintained silence on the merit of our core arguments (public ownership and stewardship of fishery resources; boundary conundrum and inclusiveness; threat of market access restrictions; food sovereignty issues, and so on), which we would like to interpret as either an obligatory reticence to their present affiliations or as an endorsement.

The reference to the harmonization process initiated by FAO and the subjective claim that the MSC is the most widely used standard are supposedly red herrings that hide commercial interests behind the veneer of global public benefits.

If sustainability of natural commodities, most of which are held under public trust by the state (the *de jure* CPR-owner), is the real aim of the private promoters of voluntary ecolabels, why is such certification, in practice, limited only to highly valued poster species, rather than targeting the widely consumed (and traded) low-value species which form the backbone of most fisheries in developing maritime economies? One cannot easily fathom this bias, but to consider it as an oxymoronic position that keeps afloat the very logic of commercial certification.

That the MSC does not per se get involved in fisheries management reveals the conflict of interest. It would be too naïve to accept the cliché that a non-state actor stretches its muscles, that too with the help of a business arm, to ‘compell’ a country’s fisheries to follow sustainability norms with absolutely no commercial interests.

Then the authors try to tinker on our ignorance of the MSC processes, especially the traceability. Going by the MSC process, the product while being consumed can still

be from a damaged ecosystem (from a multispecies perspective), as is likely in most tropical-water fisheries. (Note: Since the objective of our article was not a diagnosis of the MSC, we do not want to elaborate this point further).

The authors also allege that we have failed to fathom scenarios and perspectives, and that reading our paper is like eating a half-cooked meal. However, their attempt harping on silly omissions with hardly any neutrality is like forcibly opening the cooker even before the first whistle is heard.

Regarding the Ashtamudi short-necked clam fishery, the authors have tried to rebut our argument that the MSC did not charge the normal fee from fisher stakeholders, by providing a reference. Though the total cost of the certification was Rs 29.84 lakhs, no mention has been made on who the payer is. We have gathered from reliable sources that about Rs 15 lakhs was borne by a state-funded agency, the Marine Product Export Development Agency. We would also like to update the authors on the recent developments happening in the country. The Friends of Earth, another player in the ecolabel market, has expressed interest in recognizing equivalence if India moots its own ecolabel in fisheries. The authors could have been more enlightening had they given at least a glimpse of the present status of the MSC-labelled Ashtamudi fishery.

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