

# Bering Sea / Aleutian Islands Pollock and Gulf of Alaska Pollock



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April 2005; recertified  
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SPECIES Pollock  
(*Theragra chalcogramma*)

FISHING METHOD Pelagic trawl

COUNTRY United States

LOCATION



The Pacific Ocean, in the eastern Bering Sea north of the Aleutian Islands; and the Gulf of Alaska, to the south and east of the Aleutian Islands

FISHERY TONNAGE 815,000 tonnes; 19,000 tonnes, 50,000 tonnes (2009)

“FOR SOME TIME, efforts to introduce pollock into the UK market fell flat on their face because it wasn’t cod,” says Jim Gilmore, Public Affairs Director of the At-Sea Processors Association (APA) whose members trawl the icy waters of these vast, iconic and commercially valuable fisheries. “Next thing I know, Young’s is running out MSC-certified pollock products – and they’re selling!”

### New markets for a ‘new’ fish

These days, shoppers in Britain take for granted their Co-op Alaska pollock fish cakes and Young’s Chip Shop Jumbo Specials (“two extra-large wild Alaska pollock fillets in a crisp bubbly batter”), bringing them more in line with consumers in the US, where pollock has been declared on labels for years in everything from Bake ‘N Broil fish fillets and Batter ‘N Brew portions to Healthybake Bites and Trident’s The Ultimate Fish Stick sold in stores throughout North America. In Britain prior to 2005, by comparison, pollock was simply labelled ‘white fish’ in order not to alarm conservative shoppers wedded to cod and haddock.

### Sustainable fisheries management

In fact, pollock has been harvested sustainably for decades. Fishery managers take a precautionary approach and set the annual allowable catch below acceptable biological levels, as recommended by a panel of federal, state and academic scientists. Where there is uncertainty, managers opt for conservative limits. All vessels carry at least one federal fishery observer to monitor and record catches and conduct scientific research. Observers are also assigned to all onshore processing facilities for pollock.

Bycatch and waste are low – pollock makes up 99 percent of what is caught in the net – and all parts of the fish are used in a variety of products. To protect Steller sea lion rookeries and feeding areas, the fishery has established significant closed areas throughout the fishing grounds. A system is also in place whereby a portion of the pollock quota is allocated to remote communities in Alaska.

As with other MSC-certified fisheries, however, the Alaska pollock certification carried some conditions to ensure the fishery continues, as it has done historically, to expand scientific research and action to protect the stock and environment of this important marine ecosystem.

### Market access and retention

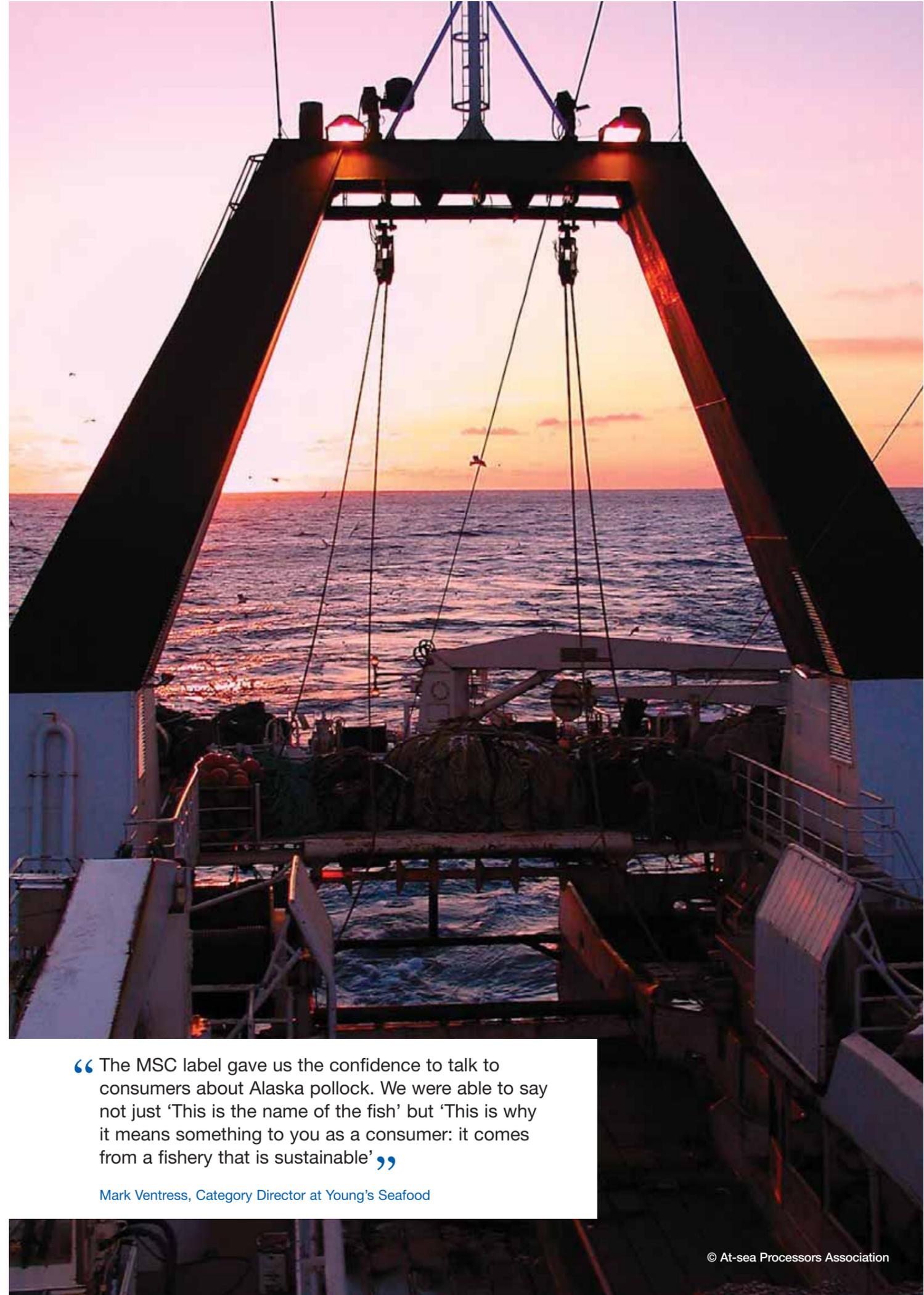
“We entered this programme because we believed we met the MSC standard,” Gilmore stresses, “but what the MSC does, through its third-party validation, is provide an added assurance – and recognition in the seafood community that it is a well managed fishery. It gives us enhanced visibility.”

The real surge in visibility, however, has been for the fish itself. Japan is traditionally a big buyer of Alaska pollock (minced, as surimi, and for roe products) but Europe and the US are the growth markets. In the US, for example, McDonald’s is using Alaska pollock almost exclusively in its fish sandwiches. “McDonald’s appreciates the fact that Alaska pollock is MSC certified, even if it doesn’t tout it,” says Gilmore. “In Europe and the UK, there is no doubt that there are benefits to us from being in the MSC programme in terms of market access and retention.”

Hard facts and figures are harder to come by – but in Britain, sales of pollock generally (including Alaska pollock) have doubled in the past two years from 11 percent by volume to 23 percent, according to TNS market research. It’s a trend that can only benefit those who fish for MSC certified pollock.

“I don’t think we can give all the credit to the MSC for putting pollock on the map,” says Pat Shanahan, programme director of Genuine Alaska Pollock Producers (GAPP), “but certainly it was helpful. We had a concerted effort going on already to change the words ‘white fish’ to pollock. Companies like Young’s, which made a commitment to the MSC early on, were more likely to move in that direction because of the MSC label. The MSC did play a part.”

In January 2009, the Bering Sea/Aleutian Islands pollock and the Gulf of Alaska pollock fisheries announced they were entering reassessment, the process required every five years in order to remain certified. “Our members said, ‘OK, we’re going to take the plunge because it’s useful to us – especially in Europe,’” Gilmore says. “It was their choice. I’m confident that we have created markets, maintained markets and provided assurances because of it.”



“ The MSC label gave us the confidence to talk to consumers about Alaska pollock. We were able to say not just ‘This is the name of the fish’ but ‘This is why it means something to you as a consumer: it comes from a fishery that is sustainable’ ”

Mark Ventress, Category Director at Young’s Seafood