

Series 'Fish welfare as a business' #2

Critical comments on the new ASC fish welfare standard ^[1]



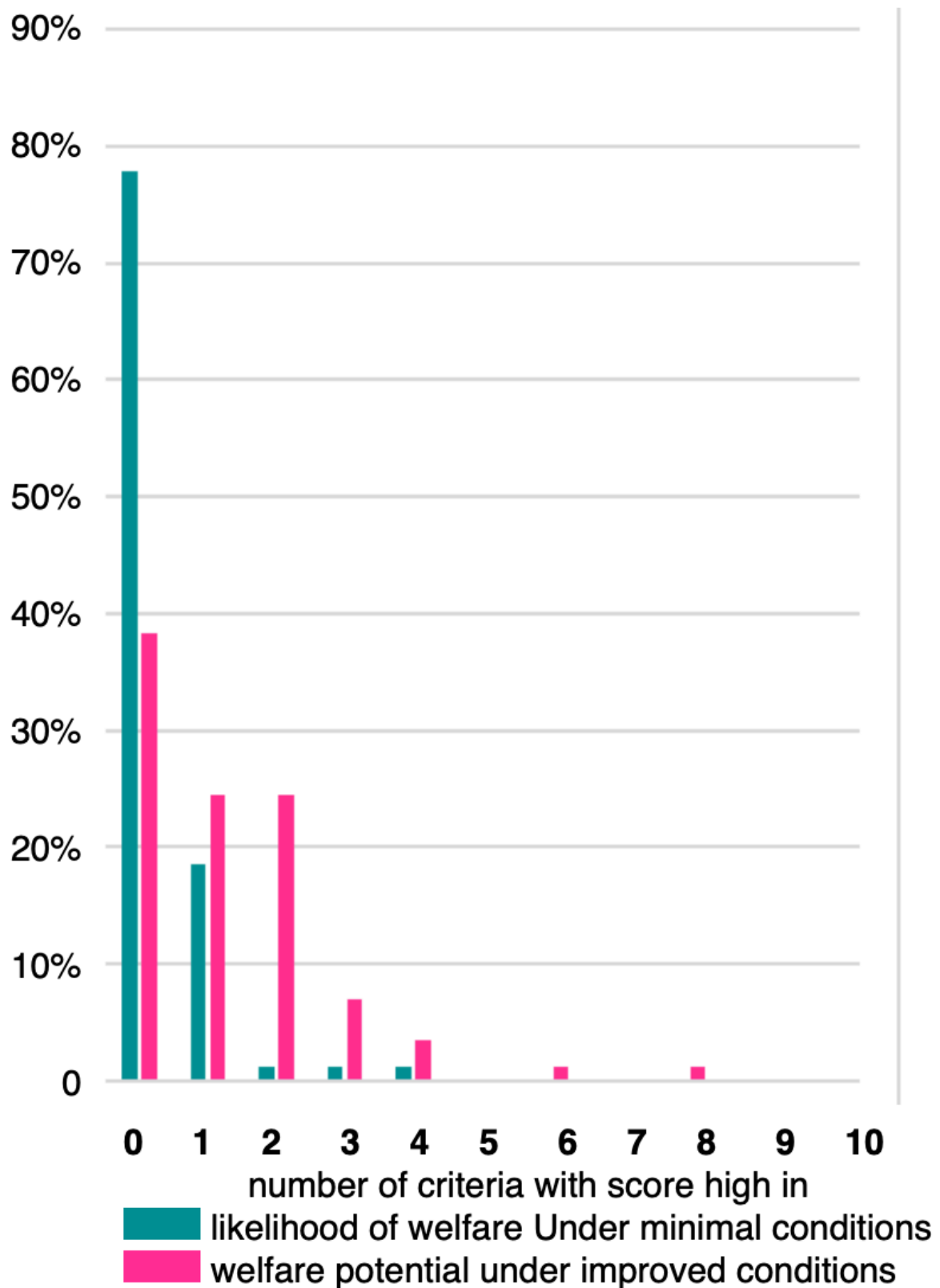
The Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) was founded in 2010 by WWF International and the Dutch Sustainable Trade Initiative, as a complement to the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC), co-founded by WWF in 2000 as a fisheries label, after MSC did not want to deal with aquaculture issues.

The launch of ASC was preceded by several years of intensive international stakeholder dialogues led by WWF USA. In some of these species-specific dialogues, I was one of the few participants, if not alone, who unsuccessfully called for the inclusion of fish welfare criteria.

In 2017, Open Philanthropy offered the ASC the opportunity to develop fish welfare criteria and supplement its standards with corresponding guidelines. At the same time, a similar offer was made to fair-fish and Friend of the Sea as well as to several other aquaculture certification systems.

Percentage of 86 commonly farmed species capable to experience welfare in captivity

Source: fair-fish-database.net · Graph: Billo HP. Studer May 2024



No species-specific approach, no consideration of groundwork

All in all, I am disappointed that a seven-year and well-funded process of developing fish welfare criteria for ASC has resulted in a rather modest outcome.

I am particularly surprised that ASC, whose standards were previously species-specific — something I have always been in favour of — is now abandoning this approach when it finally would make even more sense, as there is certainly nothing more important to address on a species-specific basis than the welfare of the individuals of a species.

And I am also surprised that there is virtually no trace of the groundwork that fair-fish has done for fish welfare, even though former fair-fish collaborators were involved at one time or another in the development of ASC's fish welfare criteria.

Which aquatic species is capable of experiencing welfare in captivity?

One of the key findings of the research published in the fair-fish-database.net is the very low ability of almost all species to experience welfare in captivity. The database has so far profiled 86 commonly farmed species, all of which are unable to thrive in the prevailing minimal farming conditions, with only 3% of species scoring high in 2 to 4 of a total of 10 criteria for the **likelihood** of welfare under **minimal** farming conditions.

Examining on the other hand the **potential** to thrive under **improved** conditions, only two species score high on more than half of the 10 criteria, which appears to be a reasonable threshold for a fish to thrive in captivity: the Nile tilapia (*Oreochromis niloticus*), scoring high on 8 of 10 criteria [2], and the African catfish (*Clarias gariepinus*), scoring high in 6 criteria [3]). 10% of the species have a high potential for only 3 or 4 criteria, while 86% of all species achieve a high potential score for only 0 to 2 criteria. —>Graph

Some progress on 'good practice'

I understand that ASC has been established primarily as a standard, not to change the industry, but to keep it in a changing market where a growing minority of concerned consumers could challenge its market share. To prevent them from dropping out, companies that comply with some criteria — which are nothing more than 'good practice' to keep fishes alive until slaughter and deliver acceptable quality — are promised a 'fish welfare' label, which actually only stands for avoiding some of the worst practices. While this is certainly a step forward, it does not wash away the fact that farmed aquatic animals in almost all cases are far from experiencing 'animal welfare', not necessarily because farmers won't do everything they can to reduce animal suffering, but because most species are unable to thrive in captivity due to their biology — including market-leading species such as salmon, trout, sea bass, sea bream, and many others.

What the new ASC standards propose under the principle of 'animal health and welfare' is mostly limited to a few critical points. The good news in criterion 4.1 is that staff must be trained in animal health and welfare issues, that a veterinarian (but not a biologist) must be appointed, that water parameters, morphology, diseases, and mortality must be monitored daily on the basis of a health and welfare plan, and that feeding must be based on a feeding plan. The good news in criterion 4.2 is that the handling must be minimised (no requirements for the handling of mussels, though). The good news in criterion 4.3 is that it requires effective pre-slaughter stunning and immediate and effective killing of all finfish and cleaner fish, and at least an advanced protocol for the slaughter of shrimps in criterion 4.4 (no requirements for stunning and killing of mussels, though).

However, here too, all of these measures (including criterion 4.5 on veterinary therapeutants) must be implemented anyway in order to maintain 'good practice'. They are a concern of the farmer to keep the animals healthy and alive until slaughter.

The only welfare-related criteria that go beyond current 'good practice' are

- indicator 4.1.1.13.3 (finfish and shrimps, but not cleaner fish and mussels) which requires monitoring and assessment of animal behaviour (limited to swimming activity and poor or erratic swimming);
- criterion 4.3 which requires pre-slaughter stunning in all finfish species;
- indicator 4.1.3.15 (shrimps) which calls for the phasing out of eyestalk ablation.

Finally, the suffering of the millions and millions of fishes caught to feed farmed fishes, is not taken into account at all; at best, the ASC standards are content to limit the volume of fishes caught for this purpose, for ecological reasons.

Progress for the industry, not for the animals

As a conclusion, it can be said that the new ASC standards will help improve one part of the industry to deliver quality from a production that avoids some of the worst animal suffering in aquaculture to date. It is also fair to say that by setting examples of 'good practice', the new standards could, in the long term, drag the rest of the industry along with them.

However, the new standards do not improve *welfare*, but at best reduce the suffering of the farmed aquatic animals; they do not even address the issue of species-specific suitability, let alone prioritising the farming of the few species that may experience welfare in captivity.

References:

[1] [ASC fish welfare project](#)

[2] [fair-fish profile of Nile tilapia](#)

[3] [fair-fish profile of African catfish](#)