Located on India’s south western coast, Ashtamudi Lake is the second largest estuarine system in the state of Kerala. Listed as a Ramsar wetland site of international importance the lake is home to a diverse range of fish and bi-valves.

Two fishing methods are used in this fishery: diving and hand-dredging. Both are manual fishing methods that use no mechanical power. Dug-out canoes are used to reach the shellfish beds from nearby villages. The clams are mainly processed at landing points. Some nearby depuration and processing plants also occasionally process catch from the estuary. Catch landed for export is sorted by size class and placed in crates. After cleaning, the clams are cooked and the meat and shells are separated. The meat is washed and shipped to the nearby exporter’s factory where they are heat treated and then frozen for export to Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia & Indonesia. The total value of these exports is around 10 crore rupees per annum, which contributes substantially to the local and national economy.

INDIA GETS ITS FIRST MSC CERTIFIED FISHERY

Ashtamudi Lake contributes approximately 80% of the overall clam export trade in India and supports the livelihoods of around 3,000 fishers involved in cleaning, processing and trading clams.

Since 1981 clams from Ashtamudi Lake have been exported to overseas markets. The clam catch from the Lake reached a peak of 10,000 tonnes per annum in 1991 but had declined by 50% in 1993 due to unregulated fishing practices and over-exploitation. In response, local fishermen in consultation with the Central Marine Fisheries Research Institute, the Kerala Department of Fisheries and the District Administration put in place a series of measures to restore clam stocks. This included introducing a ‘closed season’ from December to February each year, mesh size restrictions for nets, and a minimum export size for each catch. These measures were successful in restoring and sustaining landings back to 10,000 tonnes per annum, and subsequently leading to a relatively stable catch.

FISHING METHODS AND PROCESSING

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The stewardship and self-regulation demonstrated by local communities led Worldwide Fund for Nature-India (WWF-India) and the Marine Stewardship Council (MSC) to view this fishery as an ideal prospect for MSC certification. The pre-assessment was facilitated by WWF-India and the following aspects of the short neck clam resource in Ashtamudi Laken were investigated:

- Sustainability of the resource under certification;
- Environmental impacts of the fishery;
- Laws and regulations governing the fishery.

The pre-assessment results indicated a need to:

- Monitor the environmental impact of the fishery;
- Conduct periodical stock assessments for subscribing harvest control rules; and
- Introduce a governing council for managing the resources sustainably.

A Governing Council was formed with the District Collector as Chairman and the Deputy Director of Fisheries as the Convenor. The Council has 20 members who meet once every quarter. The Council reviews and addresses the health of the clam fishery and any issues that are being faced by the clam fishers.

Once the environmental impact assessment was undertaken and the Governing Council was established, the fishery underwent a full MSC assessment in September 2014 and is now the first fishery to be MSC certified in India.

The Marine Stewardship Council is an international non-profit organisation set up to help transform the seafood market to a sustainable basis. The MSC runs the only certification and ecolabelling program for wild-capture fisheries consistent with the International Social and Environmental Accreditation and Labelling (ISEAL) Code of Good Practice for Setting Social and Environmental Standards and the United Nations Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) Guidelines for the Ecolabelling of Fish and Fishery Products from Marine Capture Fisheries. These guidelines are based upon the FAO Code of Conduct for Responsible Fishing and require that credible fishery certification and ecolabelling schemes include:

- Objective third-party fishery assessment based on scientific evidence;
- Transparent processes with built-in stakeholder consultation and objection procedures;
- Standards based on the sustainability of target species, ecosystems and management.

In total, over 340 fisheries are engaged in the MSC program with 240 certified and 100 under full assessment. Together, fisheries already certified or in full assessment record annual catches of close to 10 million metric tonnes of seafood. This represents over 11% of the annual global harvest of wild capture fisheries. Worldwide, more than 25,000 seafood products, which can be traced back to the certified sustainable fisheries, bear the blue MSC ecolabel.