TERMS OF REFERENCE

Aquaculture in Protected Areas:

CONSULTATION DRAFT

Contents

1. About the Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC)

We are setting The Standard for seafood.

Impact-focused, Aquaculture Stewardship Council (ASC) is driving **the world's leading independent certification programme for responsibly farmed seafood.**

Setting the most robust standards and providing the highest assurance and integrity throughout the supply chain, we are leading the transformation of the seafood farming industry transparently towards environmental sustainability and social responsibility.

All this ensures that ASC-labelled seafood, available in over 100 countries, has been farmed with care.

Farmers choose ASC certification to benefit from the biggest global footprint providing the most supply and sales opportunities.

Retailers choose ASC labelled seafood to benefit from the highest assurance throughout the supply chain and strong global recognition of the ASC brand.

Seafood lovers choose ASC labelled seafood to make a healthy and tasty choice and drive a positive impact on the planet and people.

2. Introduction

Aquaculture now provides the majority of the world's aquatic animal production, with 94.4 million tonnes of farmed aquatic animals in 2022, and ~130.9 million tonnes including algae, marking the first time aquaculture has surpassed capture fisheries by volume (FAO, 2024). This trend is expected to continue in the medium term as aquaculture supplies most of the incremental demand for aquatic foods.

Concurrently, the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF) commits Parties to conserve at least 30% of terrestrial, inland water, and coastal/marine areas by 2030 (Target 3, "30×30"), through effectively managed, ecologically representative, well connected and equitably governed systems of Protected Areas (PAs) and Other Effective Area Based Conservation Measures (OECMs) (CBD, 2023). This framework emphasises effectiveness and governance quality, not only coverage.

The International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) definition and categorisation of PAs (Categories I–VI) (IUCN, 2008) is globally recognised and widely used by governments and conservation bodies to articulate management

objectives and allowable uses. However, national adoption and implementation vary, and not all designated sites are assigned an IUCN category, creating challenges for certification alignment (i.e., ensuring that requirements are consistent with recognised conservation frameworks).

Within this evolving policy landscape, the ASC Farm Standard references IUCN categories and generally restricts siting within PAs, with limited allowances in Categories V and VI where demonstrable compatibility with conservation objectives can be shown (ASC, 2023; ASC, 2025). For shrimp, ASC interpretation materials reference a "≤25% of the total PA area" sub-zoning condition when specific criteria are met (ASC, 2023), however; interpretation and verification of this condition are subject to varying perspectives across jurisdictions.

Given the rising importance of aquatic foods for global nutrition (≥20% of animal source protein for ~3.2 billion people in 2021) and the simultaneous expansion and strengthening of PA systems under the GBF, there is an urgent need to clarify how aquaculture can operate responsibly within or near PAs in a manner that is scientifically robust, auditable, and aligned with conservation outcomes.

3. Project Objective

The objectives of this project are to clarify how aquaculture can operate within PAs and ensure that ASC certification requirements are aligned with globally recognised conservation frameworks, including the IUCN PA categories and the GBF. The project seeks to produce a practical, audit-ready framework developed collaboratively with key stakeholders and technical experts. This framework will provide clear, evidence-based guidance for determining the compatibility of aquaculture activities, and how responsible production can coexist with conservation objectives.

The aim is to strengthen ASC's ability to support biodiversity conservation while enabling responsible aquaculture development. In practice, this means developing clear operational requirements for PAs across the ASC standards, supported by guidance in the ASC Farm Interpretation Manual. These revisions will reduce ambiguity, improve audit consistency, and enhance ASC's credibility with governments, conservation bodies, and market stakeholders. This work directly supports ASC's mission to transform aquaculture towards environmental and social responsibility and aligns with ASC's Strategy by advancing nature-positive practices.

The project addresses environmental risks to biodiversity, habitats, and ecosystem processes in and around PAs. It also considers social impacts, such as safeguarding community and indigenous interests, and potential economic

impacts, such as providing clarity for producers and investors, reducing compliance uncertainty, and supporting market access for responsibly sited farms. The expected sustainability outcomes include improved alignment with global conservation targets, improved governance transparency, and the integration of restorative aquaculture principles.

The project will also strengthen ASC's alignment with other recognised frameworks, including IUCN guidelines, Natura 2000, Ramsar, and World Heritage impact assessment protocols. This will ensure ASC standards remain credible and consistent with the global conservation and certification landscape.

4. Project Scope

This project will develop a globally relevant framework that explains how aquaculture can operate responsibly within or near a PA under ASC certification. The work includes reviewing existing ASC requirements and interpretation guidance, comparing them against IUCN PA categories and national legislation and identifying gaps or inconsistencies. A key part of the project is the design of a risk-based compatibility assessment, and methodology, that helps determine aquaculture operations' compatibility with a PA. The assessment will be based on broad, practical criteria—rather than prescriptive thresholds—helping farms understand compatibility while enabling auditors to verify compliance in a clear and consistent way. The outputs will include revised ASC requirements for the ASC Standards, interpretation guidance in the Interpretation Manual, and a jointly developed ASC–IUCN White Paper. The framework will be tested to ensure it is practical and scalable. Stakeholder engagement will be central, with opportunities for targeted and stakeholder consultation in line with the ASC Programme Development and Revision Procedure (PDRP). The project will follow the ASC's governance requirements and Metrics Methodology, to ensure transparency and credibility.

Subject to sufficient funding, specific activities to be undertaken as part of this project will include:

Task A – Evidence Consolidation & Baseline Mapping

- A1. Collect and summarise global and regional guidance relevant to aquaculture in PAs (e.g., IUCN guidelines, GBF Target 3, Natura 2000, Ramsar, etc.). Produce an evidence map of definitions, category intents, and existing rules/thresholds.

- A2. Develop a clear typology of PA contexts for aquaculture (e.g., IUCN Categories I–VI, multiple use zones, OECMs) and list the types of conservation objectives these areas aim to protect (such as habitats, species, or ecological processes).

Task B – Standards Alignment & Legal/Policy Read Across

- B1. Compare the requirements of the ASC Standards with IUCN categories and national PA frameworks. Identify where differences and/or unclear points exist, including cases where conservation objectives are missing or poorly defined.

- B2. Review the origin and conditions of the "≤25% of total PA area" reference and propose transparent ways to accounts for sub-zoning and governance criteria.

Task C – Compatibility Assessment Framework & Metrics

- C1. Design a practical, risk=based assessment to help determine where aquaculture systems are compatible with PA objectives. This approach uses broad criteria and indicators, rather than prescriptive numerical limits, so farms can better understand compatibility and auditors can assess compliance more effectively.

- C2. Calibrate the level of detail and evidence required, based on the strength of the PA designation, applying checks relevant to the sensitivity of the PA.

Task D – Joint ASC–IUCN White Paper

- D1. Draft a White Paper summarising findings, the framework, and recommendations; circulate for formal review.

- D2. Finalise the White Paper and prepare a technical annex with definitions, metrics, and templates.

Task E – Revision of the ASC Standards Text & Guidance

- E1. Draft revised indicator language and auditor/producer guidance (e.g., decision trees) that operationalise the compatibility framework, cover poorly defined PA objectives, and enable consistent audits across jurisdictions.

- E2. Prepare case studies (e.g., shellfish longlines in Category VI seascapes; net-pens near seabird colonies; RAS/ponds near freshwater reserves).

Task F – Stakeholder Consultation & Validation

- F1. Facilitate targeted consultations with key stakeholders (e.g., conservation authorities, PA managers, industry, NGOs, Indigenous rights holders) and further stakeholder consultations to test clarity and feasibility.

- F2. Run validation workshop(s); document feedback and incorporate revisions following best practice.

Task G – Pilot Application

- G1. Field-test the framework in 2–3 representative PA contexts and capture lessons for wider implementation.

5. Stakeholder Involvement

ASC will engage a wide range of stakeholders to ensure that the framework for aquaculture in PAs is scientifically robust, practical, and aligned with global conservation objectives. Engagement will happen throughout the process, with opportunities to provide input at stages. Key stakeholder targets will be:

- producers operating in or near PAs, including farm trade bodies and representative organisations;
- academia and research institutions with expertise in aquaculture, biodiversity, and spatial planning;
- civil society organisations, both environmental and social, including NGOs and community representatives
- retailers and brands with commitments to sustainable sourcing;
- farm input suppliers and service providers such as feed manufacturers, broodstock suppliers, and consultants;
- industry actors including processors and trading companies;
- governments and intergovernmental agencies responsible for Protected Area governance; and
- Conformity Assessment Bodies (CABs) involved in certification.

Engagement will be organised through a Technical Working Group (TWG), which will act as the main mechanism for technical development. The TWG will include a core group of subject-matter experts (e.g., aquaculture systems, PA management, biodiversity impact assessment). It will also operate in conjunction with a broader consultive group that introduces additional stakeholders such as producers, sector representatives, PA guidance advocates (e.g., Ramsar and Natura 2000), retailers, and other industry stakeholders during key stages. This structure will ensure that technical depth is maintained while enabling broader perspectives to inform decision-making.

Stakeholders will be able to contribute through targeted consultations, workshops, and surveys during the drafting of the White Paper and compatibility framework. Once sufficient agreement has been reached within the TWG, outputs will be made available for public consultation.

At least two 60-day public consultations are planned, with a third consultation added if deemed necessary based on feedback. These consultations will allow

stakeholders to review proposed metrics, indicator requirements, and guidance, and to provide additional information to confirm or refine these elements.

Summaries of stakeholder consultations will be made publicly available, along with a list of contributing stakeholders. Full feedback will also be published, but responses will not be attributed to individual respondents to maintain confidentiality and encourage open participation.

In addition to the TWG, the project will be supported by a member of the Technical Advisory Group (TAG) which provides technical recommendations and advice to the ASC Board of Trustees. The group focuses on technical matters related to the ASC programme including Farm and Feed standards, chain of custody and certification and accreditation requirements. Members are selected for their technical expertise and with representatives from the aquaculture industry, NGOs, academia, and the assurance sector. The oversight and responsibility of Ad-hoc Advisory Groups and TWG are part of TAG's formal function and take place in close coordination with the Executive.

ASC will monitor participation to ensure adequate and balanced representation throughout the process.

6. Project Milestones

Date(s)	Activity	Engagement opportunity?
Jan 2026 (Month 1)	TAG 36 Meeting (13th January 2026) – Endorsement of Project Terms of Reference (ToR)	No
Jan – Mar 2026 (Months 1-3)	Evidence and baseline mapping (evidence map; defining the typology of a protected area; standards crosswalk)	No
Mar 2026 (Month 3)	Public consultation on the project ToR and TWG ToR (30 days)	Yes
Apr 2026 (Month 4)	Formation of the TWG TAG 37 Meeting (16th April 2026) - Summary of feedback from public consultation, and proposal for TWG composition	No

May – Aug 2026 (Month 5-8)	Gap analysis and alignment review (including assessment of the '25% rule')	No
Oct – Dec 2026 (Months 10-12)	First draft of the ASC–IUCN whitepaper development (including a technical annex)	No
Jan – Mar 2027 (Months 13-15)	First draft of the revised ASC text (indicators + interpretation guidance)	No
Apr 2027 (Month 16)	TAG 41 Meeting (Date TBC) – Endorsement on draft revised ASC text	No
Sep 2027 (Month 21)	First Public consultation on draft revised ASC text (60 days)	Yes
Nov 2027 (Month 23)	Pilot testing (results from 2–3 PA contexts; lessons for scale-up) based on feedback	No
Nov – Dec 2027 (Months 23-24)	Second drafting of the revised ASC text	No
Jan 2028 (Month 25)	TAG 44 Meeting (Date TBC) - Summary of feedback and revisions made to draft ASC indicators from public consultation. Endorsement on final revised ASC text.	No
Mar 2028 (Month 27)	Public consultation on final revised ASC text (60 days)	Yes
May 2028 (Month 29)	Final Package: White Paper; Revised ASC text; Auditor decision tools; Communications brief	No
Jun 2028 (Month 30)	TAG 45 Meeting (Date TBC) - Summary of feedback and revisions made to updated final ASC indicators from public consultation. Endorsement of agreed text to be added to the Farm Standard.	No

In addition to the public consultations listed above, ASC will conduct targeted consultations, workshops, and surveys during key development stages (e.g., drafting the White Paper, designing the compatibility framework, and revising ASC text). These activities are part of the Technical Working Group process and will provide opportunities for stakeholder input outside public consultation periods.

7. Governance and Decision Making

ASC staff will develop proposed metrics as well as identify new indicator requirements for PAs following the ASC Programme Development and Revision Procedure and Metrics Methodology. This work will be informed by expert input and continuous stakeholder engagement, culminating in the development of a joint ASC–IUCN White Paper that sets out the technical framework for alignment with global conservation standards.

To ensure strong governance and technical integrity, a TWG will be convened as the main forum for technical development and review. The TWG will develop and propose key outputs to ASC—ultimately recommending revised requirements—validate technical decisions, and ensure alignment with ASC governance processes. The TAG retains its governance role in reviewing and endorsing proposals for stakeholder consultation. TAG provides advice and recommendations on ASC Standards and related technical issues, including further development, modification, and interpretation. Following public consultation, TAG reviews stakeholder feedback and advises on next steps or makes recommendations to the ASC Board, which holds final decision-making authority on adoption of scope extensions.

Where stakeholder feedback or internal review identifies areas requiring deeper technical development, additional TWGs may be formed to provide targeted expertise and recommendations to TAG. For this project, a TWG is expected to be essential from inception through to finalisation.

TAG recommendations are preferably made by consensus. If no consensus can be reached, agreement on advice by the TAG is made by simple majority of members. In such circumstances, the Executive prepares a report to the Board which clearly indicates a summary of the minority and majority positions.

Previous discussions and governance decisions relevant to this project, including the need for alignment with IUCN guidelines and ASC's PA interpretation, have informed the draft Terms of Reference and the proposed governance structure. More information on ASC Governance is available here.

8. Risk Assessment

Identified Risk	Mitigation strategy
Technical complexity of compatibility framework	Developing an auditable, risk-based compatibility framework for diverse aquaculture systems in varied Protected Area contexts is technically challenging and resource-intensive. This risk will be mitigated through a phased approach, starting with high-priority PA categories and aquaculture systems. Pilot testing in two to three representative contexts will ensure practicality before global rollout, and iterative refinement will follow based on pilot results and stakeholder feedback.
Limited stakeholder engagement due to complexity and global scope	The global scope and technical complexity of this project could limit stakeholder engagement. The work spans multiple frameworks (e.g., IUCN categories, the Kunming–Montreal Global Biodiversity Framework (GBF), and ASC standards) and involves diverse stakeholder groups. This complexity may discourage participation or result in gaps in representation. To mitigate this, the project will begin with a clear stakeholder mapping exercise and use targeted outreach alongside multiple engagement formats, including virtual workshops and bilateral calls. The composition of the TWG will provide a structured mechanism to maintain broad representation and transparency throughout development.
Delays in project timelines due to stakeholder feedback requiring additional work and further consultation rounds	Delays may be incurred when stakeholder feedback highlights gaps or issues that need more technical development before moving forward. To manage this, project milestones will be aligned with ASC governance calendars from inception, and TWG and TAG reviews will be scheduled well in advance. Virtual meetings will be used to accelerate decision-making, and realistic timelines will be communicated to donors and stakeholders early in the process.
Insufficient funding or delayed donor commitments	External funding is critical for consultancy and pilot testing, and delays could impact timelines and deliverables. Contingency planning will allow for phased implementation if full funding is delayed, and co-

	funding opportunities with conservation bodies will be explored.
Misalignment between ASC standards and global conservation frameworks	Divergences between ASC requirements and IUCN Protected Area categories or GBF principles could undermine credibility and sustainability objectives. This will be addressed through a comprehensive standards review early in the project, comparing ASC requirements with IUCN guidance and selected national Protected Area governance frameworks. External experts will be engaged to validate interpretations and ensure scientific robustness. Alignment decisions will be documented in the White Paper to maintain transparency.
Sustainability opportunity not fully realised	Sustainability opportunities could be missed if the framework focuses narrowly on compliance rather than promoting nature-positive aquaculture and regenerative practices. To capture this opportunity, sustainability principles will be integrated into compatibility assessment metrics, and case studies of restorative aquaculture will be included in the White Paper. Communications will highlight these benefits to attract donor and stakeholder support.
Impact on existing producers operating in Protected Areas	The project may have implications for producers operating within or near PAs if updated approaches lead to adjustments in how activities in these areas are assessed. Any potential changes will consider practical farming contexts to ensure requirements remain clear, proportionate and workable. Producers will be engaged early to understand current practices and challenges. Producer representatives will also participate in consultative processes to help inform the development of any updates. Where adjustments are proposed, clear guidance, timelines and, where appropriate, phased implementation will support a smooth transition.

9. Contact Information

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10. Stakeholder Feedback

ASC welcomes stakeholder feedback on this Terms of Reference at any time. Stakeholders may forward concerns or complaints to consultation@asc-aqua.org; or as per ASC's Complaint Procedure.

11. Amendment History

Date	Version	Summary of Amendment
January 2026	0.1	New Document
March 2026	0.2	Consultation Draft