



Yes Minister, We are worried

Julian Fox explains why anglers fear for bass stocks. There are lots of small fish about, he says, but the size of them is shrinking...

It is that time of year when there are few bass around. Scientists say bass shoal offshore in winter to breed, and commercial fishermen confirm this is true because they target the shoals, netting all they can.

On the face of it, scientists and some anglers tell us there are increasing numbers of bass, in fact more than there ever has been. It is even being said by some blinkered individuals that BASS complains about a lack of bass because its members are not very good at catching them.

My experience and that of BASS members tells me that there are fewer bass in our seas, so who is correct and why are we worried?

The last proper assessment of bass stocks took place in 2004, but scientists were so uncertain of the data that they refused to give any fisheries management advice based on it. All they could say was that the amount of commercial fishing for bass should not be allowed to increase.

In 2008, after further study, the same advice was given. What does this mean? Well, to me, it means we have no idea of the state of bass stocks.

I believe in the science, so when a scientist says the data is so poor that we really do not know what will happen in the future, I worry. I also worry that the 2008 report revealed that commercial fishing effort on bass had increased. Indeed both the size of the catching fleet and the total catch rose, and in 2004 the total bass catch was the highest ever.

The even greater worry is that scientists reported that the actual catch is likely to be at least five times greater than reported in official statistics.

Bass scandal

When a Government minister, and more recently the ministry responsible for fisheries, confirmed that the commercial inshore fleet can 'harvest' the bass stock after it has used up its quota for other species, I begin to think that there must be a conspiracy afoot.

I suppose all of this is understandable because every fish in our seas is managed



Julian Fox holds his personal best bass of 13lb - caught from Ireland

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for the benefit of commercial fishermen. Despite the many hundreds of millions of pounds a year that sea angling brings to our economy, we continue to be ignored.

Is it unreasonable to ask for our bass stocks to be managed to provide anglers with more and bigger bass?

It was in 1990 that the Government set the minimum commercial landing size for bass at 36cm (check out how small that is on a ruler) and that's why, apparently, there are lots of bass; lots of 36cm bass, that is! Protecting estuary nursery areas and warmer winters have also seen to that.

It is fairly easy to catch small bass, but anglers want to catch bigger bass and lots of them. As the years go by people forget that it never used to be like this. I suppose you never miss what you've never had.

Does it matter that things aren't what they used to be, that species get changed

by man's intervention or even that some species become extinct? I would argue it does, for when we do that to another species we are all changed. We are all poorer, even if we don't know it yet.

The thing is, it is not like this in other countries. Every year many British anglers experience what bass fishing used to be like by travelling abroad. There is glaring evidence of the damage that commercial fishing has done to our bass population. I don't need science to tell me that; I just need to go fishing in Ireland. In 1990 commercial fishing for bass was banned there and it is easy to see the difference in the size and numbers of their big bass.

As a British angler, and part of a UK industry worth many millions of pounds each year to our economy, I want to catch big fish and I want to catch more of them. That's why BASS is worried about bass. **SA**