

BASS Response 1

15th January, 2013

Dear Mr Derriman

Bass Management

I have been forwarded a paper on bass management that you have recently produced which I would like to respond to, on behalf of the Bass Anglers' Sportfishing Society (BASS).

Firstly, I was pleased to read that you accept the possibility that an increased bass mls can bring benefits for most, if not all, sectors. It was also good to read of the former lead position Cornwall took on bass management, when you operated an mls of 37.5cm, fully 11.5cm higher than the rest of the country (and Europe). Even though the mls only applied, at that time, within 3nm you must have recognised the significant benefit accruing to Cornwall from that unilateral action.

There are, however, a number of points in your paper which I would like to either clarify or seek clarification from yourself. Roughly in the order they appear in your paper they are:

Breeding Size

You state that in general, female bass do not reach sexual maturity until they reach a length of 38cm to 42cm. As a professional fisheries manager you will no doubt agree that decisions need to be based on robust science and evidence. This is best obtained from peer reviewed scientific publications or, possibly publications from ICES. Published, but not peer reviewed, work from CEFAS, the EA, MMO or even Defra itself could also be considered as robust. Could you provide me the source for your statement about the size of sexual maturity of female bass please?

Climate Change Effects

I agree that bass do better in warmer water. However, the Cefas Solent Survey of young bass, of which I am sure you are aware, shows that in 1989 we had the best recruitment year ever recorded, followed by the second best 8 years later, in 1997. Since 1997, recruitment success has been average to poor. Worse still, the very cold spells we have experienced over recent winters (which may well be a climate change effect) have inflicted high mortality on the juvenile bass that live year round in inshore nursery areas where they are very susceptible to these cold spells. You may have seen evidence of this from the reports Derek Goodwin sends you of his surveys in the Fal and Helford (which I think some of your officers may be involved in).

Economics

I agree that commercial bass prices have changed as you report. Larger (wild) bass now sell for more per kg than smaller bass. Interestingly, a 48cm bass weighs more than twice as much as a 36cm bass (approx. 1100g vs approx. 500g). When combined with the higher price per kg, this results in a commercial bass fishermen only needing to catch 40% of the numbers of 48cm fish compared to 36cm fish to make the same income. This is a huge profit opportunity for the inshore fishermen who can target adult bass, if we allow more bass to grow to that size.

MAFF lab leaflet 59 (1987) recognised that maximum yield to the commercial sector would be achieved at an mls of 50cm and stated that this would apply to Cornwall. However, as I am sure you are aware, the profitability of your inshore fishermen was "sacrificed" (my words) to allow a much lower mls nationally so certain sectors could continue to target juveniles.

Management Issues

I am glad you agree that even if some benefit from a higher mls spills over to the water outside 12nm, that is no reason not to go ahead with the change when there is an overall benefit to UK stakeholders operating inside 12nm. This must have been recognised in Cornwall when you had an mls 11.5cm higher than other counties or the EU, even when your mls only applied out to 3nm. I don't believe the precedent that Cornwall then set was misplaced as bass are primarily an inshore fish and you yourself point out in your paper that bass may be remaining inshore in winter now more than ever, suggesting the benefit will accrue even more strongly within UK waters (inside 12nm).

Regarding non UK vessels fishing in the 6nm to 12nm zone, it is, I think, highly regrettable than the UK ban on pair trawling inside the 12nm limit could not be applied to non UK, EU vessels. However, I personally believe this was still a policy that has brought benefit to UK stakeholders, even allowing for this 'spillover'. Even if a higher mls could not be applied to all vessels (which would be regrettable) I suspect we would not see a huge influx of small French inshore vessels.

I agree that any bass mls increase is best done at a national level and I am also pleased that the Southern, Devon and Severn and Cornish IFCA's are discussing regional bass management as, as I have stated above, I do not think that previous unilateral action by Cornwall on this issue was mistaken.

I am interested in the potential to increase landings value by 500%. Could you give me the source for this number and the conditions under which it could be achieved please? Similarly for the 20% figure.

You state that scientists at Cefas say UK bass stocks are very robust. Can you please tell me who said this and in what publication as I would like to read this for myself. I am sure you are aware that the very latest advice from ICES on bass (Cefas play a significant role in this assessment) recommends a 20% reduction in catches to be achieved through technical measures aimed at reducing fishing mortality on juveniles among other things. As a key regulator and manager of sustainable fisheries, can you tell me how you intend implementing this advice?

Recent Issues Raised

Firstly I would like to make clear that BASS are calling for an increase in mls so that the fish have at least one chance to breed before they are harvested, not for bass to be reserved solely for sports-fishing. In the USA Striped Bass are not reserved solely for sports-fishing, stocks are managed for maximum long term sustainable economic benefit to the whole community.

I think bass stock recovery plans may be forced to be implemented as a result of the combination of recent very poor recruitment, due to the cold winter weather of recent years together with implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive, which I am sure you are well aware of. The sooner we make a start on this, the less painful and more successful the necessary measures will be, in my opinion.

I agree that the modal length of the 95mm mesh gillnet as per the Cefas paper is 44cm, with a spread of 4cm. This net will still catch bass below 40cm, but I agree it is unlikely to catch many below 37.5cm. This is clearly sensible for a fisherman aiming to maximise his sale-able catch.

The use by fishermen of larger mesh nets suggests they fully understand the greater profitability to be made from catching larger bass and are effectively already fishing to a higher mls. If more of these larger bass were available to them, by increasing the mls for all sectors, they could do even better.

Finally, concerns around catching of undersized bass in gillnets is often either from illegal activity, which is of great concern to us all, or from say mullet netters accidentally catching undersized bass (and salmonids) due to the mismatch in mls's and the fact that mullet and bass swim together in estuaries and similar environments.

Thank you for your attention and patience in reading this letter. I look forward to your comments and receiving the additional information I have requested.

Kind Regards

Nigel Horsman
BASS restoration team